Chapter 1: contract

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of all the painful bumps Iyo had taken throughout her career, the worst were always the ones born of her own recklessness. Tension locked up her neck, making every movement painful. Always the neck. Had Iyo been more careful to avoid injury when she was younger - during all those years wrestling to gymnasium crowds - would she have lost tonight's match? Likely not. Damn it, she had been so close to holding her title once more. But Liv's reactions had been just quick enough, a pair of boots to Iyo's ribs mid-Moonsault being enough to stun. The followup Oblivion had been textbook. How could Iyo be mad at anyone but herself for coming up short in a clean match?

The other members of Damage Ctrl had reassured her - Kairi and Dakota being very familiar with the endless chase of titles, only for their defence to be just as tedious a process. Much of her and Kairi's careers had been spent chasing the same titles and competing with and against each other on rotation. And Dakota had been alongside them for so long now that Iyo knew they were right, and felt her pain just as sorely as they would their own.

There was one aspect Iyo felt alienated over though, and that was the sheer competitive nature that flowed through her veins. When the others lost, they could recoup easily and remain positive about the situation - whether playing by the rules or not. Failure defined Iyo's life much more keenly, no matter how much she had grown as a person over the course of her career. Memories would always play in her mind of the depths to which she could sink when the failure was felt harshly enough. Whether Mayu or Bayley, those that she saw as standing in her way had always gotten their due.

"Got you an Icy Hot pack."

Iyo cringed at the painful effort of craning her neck to look at Rhea approaching. By her side, Dakota went stock still, hesitant and defensive after the last several weeks of re-adjusting to the RAW roster's rivalries. Kairi was comparatively relaxed leaning up against Iyo’s back, as always noting the lack of threat Iyo felt around the towering woman.

Perhaps it was odd to not feel at all uncomfortable in the midst of the most physically dominant woman in the company, but the track record spoke for itself. Rhea had never pinned Iyo, or really posed much of a threat aside from a rare bit of bluster to ensure their paths stayed uncrossed. The few times they had gone toe to toe, Iyo had come out on top after all. But however standoffish Rhea could habitually be, she had her soft spots - she had carried Iyo out of the ring a startling amount of times in the past couple months, and the same had proven true tonight.

"Thank you," Iyo said simply, Kairi accepting the gift on her behalf and applying it to her best friend's neck for her. "You didn't have to." She spoke in a straightforward manner, referring to both the pain reliever and the earlier help getting backstage.

While grateful, she was careful to keep her tone cool and detached. The woman before her didn't pose any threat at the moment, but Iyo was well aware that it had been only a week since Rhea had implied that if Iyo had won tonight, the Eradicator would have been coming after her with as much fervour as they both pursued Liv with. Perhaps that was why Rhea was treating Iyo kindly now, as a method of placating a potential future threat that had today been waylaid.

Iyo didn't need that pity.

"Yeah, well. Birds of a feather and all." The Australian gently, albeit awkwardly patted Iyo's shoulder. Dakota made an odd face in her periphery. She must not have seen the way Rhea had also consolingly patted Iyo's back as she carried the Japanese woman backstage in the first place. Strange, out of place affection was almost a hallmark of Rhea's style. In fact, the woman's hesitation even then belied her awkward bluster - though it often came off as arrogance to the untrained eye.

"Aside from sharing a side of the Pacific, I don't see too much similarity." Dakota rebuked, the Kiwi classically going on the defensive. Kairi shifted behind Iyo, hand coming to rest on the small of her back, heat blooming through the younger woman like a shot.

Rhea took a step back from the huddled Damage Ctrl, her usual haughty scowl in place as she addressed Dakota, and Kairi through proxy, "Didn't think being compared to me was offensive. But fine, point taken," she hesitated, taking another glance at Iyo, whose mounting physical pain was shortening her patience for these sorts of encounters.

She was done thinking through interactions for the night. Exhaustion was setting in, and fast. "We'll talk Monday. Good night, Rhea."

"Right. Rest up... you did well," the Australian sighed, deflating visibly. She clearly expected a different outcome from this conversation, but Iyo couldn't feel much beyond a foggy, aching anger that was quickly developing into a living form.

Iyo instead grunted her disagreement, pushing herself to her feet unsteadily and marching off with no further hurrah about it. Kairi caught up to the other woman quickly, slipping her arm around Iyo's waist to support her as the woman hobbled away in frustration. Behind her, she caught Dakota speaking, too faintly and quickly for Iyo to care about trying to translate through her brain fog. The Japanese woman pushed it all away, focusing only on the heat across her neck, and the aches of developing bruises across her torso that together formed the shapes of her failure.

Private dressing rooms were so eerily quiet. There was good reason that Rhea often went straight from the gym to the ring, with as little in-between as possible. Nothing could dissolve the silence - no amount of music, distant backstage chatter, or spiralling thoughts could overcome the pure feeling of isolation that hung over the Eradicator like a cloud. But that was a blissful ideal in comparison to dealing with the wildcards that other people presented.

She wasn't cut out to drag the weak across the finish line, not when they would just begrudge her for it and trip her up as soon as they found an opportunity to. As though others' lack of skills were her fault. No, the only thing she had control over was herself, and so she was the only person she needed. The truth was, so long as that deafening quiet was there, Rhea was miserable, but peacefully so.

It was the whiplash of the silence being broken that truly hurt, her emotions kicking back into high gear and making the contrast between what she had and what she had lost clear. Every roar of the crowd was a further introduction to anger that she had ever disappointed at all. All because she hadn't taken the time to listen to the painful truths that isolation had to share. Coming back off of an injury, she should never have been caught out and betrayed the way she had. If she couldn't tell something was amiss after so much distance and perspective, whose fault was it but her own?

Rhea could never accept that, and so she warred with the quiet.

On occasion, she could rely on Damian to break the routine, but as weeks dragged to months, their struggles diverged. Damian was at the point of true self-reflection, understanding that his losses were because he wasn't good enough at that given moment. Rhea still clung to the desperation of personifying her insecurities and failures, all in the form of a tiny perky blonde that had stolen her position in the world. It didn't matter that in retrospect, that position sucked. It had belonged to Rhea, and that made it worth clinging to.

Who was she, if not for the champion; the powerhouse of the Judgement Day; the woman who could bend weak men to her will just for the sake of it?

A knock at the door. "On in five."

Just another wrestler, it turned out.

Brutal wasn't always the type of person Rhea wanted to be, especially when it resulted in Liv beating the shit out of her with a kendo stick during a no-disqualifications match as Raquel held her down. She lashed back quickly with her head, hoping in vain to make contact with Raquel's skull, but the woman was starting to smarten up to all of Rhea's new tricks. The taller woman had also been clocking serious time at the gym, as it was no longer a simple matter of forcing her way out of Raquel's grapple. Back in the day they had chased each other's personal bests, and Rhea wouldn't be surprised if they were still near-equals in that regard.

Desperate, she pushed up and out with her legs, kicking Liv away with as much force as she could muster. The tiny blonde tumbled away into a pathetic little lump, as Raquel staggered back a few steps into the ropes, dragging Rhea alongside her. The Eradicator threw a headbutt again, this time hearing a satisfying crunch as the back of her skull made contact with the other woman's nose. Raquel cursed loudly, flinging Rhea into the nearby turnbuckle without hesitation.

On the opposite side of the ring, Liv had made it back to her feet, kendo stick still in hand as she prepared to charge. She was just about halfway across when a sudden flash of red entered the ring from the far side, bisecting Liv's charge with a running dive, taking the both of them careening into the dazed Raquel.

Rhea absorbed what she was seeing rapidly - Iyo Sky, clad in a shoddy mixture of street and ring-wear, had momentarily waylaid the pair, but the duo were rapidly recovering. Not quite fast enough, however,

to avoid Rhea rushing forward to catch Raquel with a missile dropkick as the larger woman stood back up. From the Australian's periphery, she saw a blurred flash of movement as the kendo stick came down with a satisfying thwack across Liv's back, earning a delicious shriek from the so-called champion. Straightening back up, Rhea locked gazes with Iyo, noting the smouldering intensity of her gaze. The older woman wasted no time in throwing the kendo stick Rhea's way, making a beeline for the top rope to do what she did best.

Something in the Eradicator went on autopilot, all too easily swivelling around to beat Raquel into the far corner of the ring with a mixture of strikes and kicks. It was as though this were all planned, when not ten seconds prior Rhea had been wracking her brain for any way out of her predicament and came up empty. For all the times she had interfered with Iyo's matches, she hadn’t ever thought about the favour being repaid - but those debts coming due felt all too natural now. Pressing Raquel into the corner with the kendo stick, Rhea watched as Iyo crested through the air in a perfect moonsault, crimson hair streaming beautifully through the lights behind her. Not a single part of her felt perturbed by the roar of the crowd cheering, chanting the Japanese wrestler's name as she careened into the immobile Liv.

In perfect synchronization, Rhea launched towards Liv for the pin as Iyo kipped up and tumbled forward, splashing against Raquel in the corner as the ref began to count.

One,

Two,

Three.

The arena roared - the mixture of names on their lips bloody music to Rhea's ears. If only pinning Liv during championship matches was that goddamn easy.

Iyo hadn't intervened for Rhea's sake. In all likelihood, she would have interrupted the match either way, but the younger woman being in a tough spot made for a convenient excuse to charge in guns blazing. The events of the previous weekend were still fresh in her mind - what better way to prove to herself that her defeat had been a fluke than to recreate the dizzying circumstances surrounding the previous match. Her moonsault had landed perfectly this time, courtesy of the extra bit of abuse sent Liv's way.

While the match was Rhea's alone, the pinfall may as well have been Iyo's own - the cheers she received the very ones she had been deprived of ever since Bayley had taken her title at the previous year's Wrestlemania. It was as though the entire arena had been brought to life at once, the collective breath of the crowd nearly knocking the wind out of Iyo, a sensation which sent her heart racing. A sweet catharsis, but one she couldn't linger to appreciate. She simply couldn't stay to watch Rhea revel in the glory of victory that she herself had failed to capture.

It wasn't a title match, just a shot for contention. Nonetheless, it was an achievement Iyo had hand fed to Rhea, bringing her one step closer to obtaining the title, all for the sake of pride.

Backstage, Iyo was intercepted by Dakota and Kairi, the other Japanese woman barely able to voice praise for her performance before Dakota's confusion presented itself plainly. "You didn't tell us you were scheduled to appear in that match."

Iyo kept walking, self-consciously raking her dark bangs away from her face. "I wasn't."

The truth of that statement was making itself rapidly apparent, PAs racing to and fro amidst the back halls of the venue. She was sure the General Manager, Adam Pearce would be waiting at their dressing room to intercept Iyo and give her an earful for the unauthorized interference. That was the hellish part of the business - the bureaucracy. Raquel and even Dom could show up nearly as often as they liked in Liv's matches because they were teammates, a part of the same brand which brought attention to each and every show. But they couldn't market the unexpected. Iyo treading her own path was not the way to get into the company's good graces. Not the best situation to build back up to another shot at the title.

Kairi rushed after her, looking at her with no small amount of worry, her typical calm, experienced demeanour faltering slightly. When she spoke, it was in their native Japanese. "Iyo... What are you planning?"

Dakota, several steps behind, caught up as Iyo slowed her walk and turned to face her companions. Iyo met Kairi's language shift in kind, trusting that whatever Dakota failed to understand could be translated to her later. "Nothing at all, I just needed to do that for myself," she sighed. The tension was beginning to creep back up her neck. "They shouldn’t react drastically… not unless it hurts their ratings, but the crowd loved it. Nobody will know it wasn't a booked match. I won't

make a habit of it."

The blonde hummed lowly, shaking her head in disapproval. "But why now?"

"Exactly," Dakota echoed in English. "What does helping Rhea pin Liv do for you?"

"I want to know that as well," the deep, even voice of Adam Pearce sounded behind the trio. Iyo's hackles rose, doubt creeping into her from all directions. "But that sounds like a conversation Iyo and I can first have in my office. Alone."

"Of course," Iyo responded in English with a sigh, shooting an apologetic smile to her companions. Kairi returned the sentiment with a comforting hand to her shoulder, before she and Dakota were ushered away.

But Iyo was not taken to an office, rather to a meeting room where a small handful of higher-ups in the company were seated - the head of the table occupied by none other than WWE's CCO, Paul Levesque. She swallowed nervously. This wasn't a conversation. It was an interrogation.

When Rhea arrived backstage, her ears were still ringing, the blood pounding through her skull. The crowd had been deafening, and in the moment, it had been as though Iyo and herself were of one mind. She knew that in the end, the victory was hers, but there was no feeling quite so intoxicating as the energy of a pair of wrestlers working in perfect synchronization. There had been few times Rhea had ever experienced the highs of competing as part of a tag-team who could truly click with each other. Her one match teaming with Damian had been a welcome rush, but the restrictions of an intergender match was a far cry from truly fighting in tandem in a game of equal opportunity. That chemistry was something Rhea hadn't experienced, ironically, since tag teaming with Liv Morgan herself.

As much as she loathed the woman, she had to admit they worked well together for a time - knew each other's strengths and weaknesses, and compensated for them. Liv could tumble nimbly around the ring, constantly aware of exactly where she and her opponent were positioned. She could go tit for tat with similarly sized opponents, and hold her own brazenly against much stronger wrestlers until she found an opening to exploit. Nor was she afraid to fight dirty. None of those aspects had changed about the blonde, only improved, and for that

reason she was a thorn in Rhea's side that couldn't simply be ignored.

Funnily, much of the same could be said for Iyo - barring, of course, the feelings of hatred Rhea felt towards Liv.

The Australian was so deep in her thoughts that she nearly missed the sound of hushed talking around the corner, ducking back at the last second to avoid revealing herself. It wasn't difficult to recognize Kairi's and Dakota's voices, and if not for the pang of curiosity she felt once she heard their hushed and hurried tones, she would likely have simply continued on her way. It was difficult to catch what they were saying, but there was a clear disturbed urgency to their behaviour. And where was Iyo? The trio were never far apart. Something wasn't right.

Rhea thought about revealing herself and demanding to know what the issue was, but she and Damage Ctrl had always had a bit of an uncomfortable, tense atmosphere around one another. There was no bad blood, but both they and The Judgement Day had pissed off far more than their fair share of the roster. Drawing their enemies' shared ire seemed foolish at best, not to mention that neither side could truly judge a group that was just as underhanded as their own. Times had changed, but was that enough for them to let Rhea into what could well be none of her concern?

She wasn't Iyo's keeper. They weren't even friends. But what if somehow, her enemies had gotten to the woman? A pit of worry grew in Rhea's gut.

Decision made, she stepped from around the corner, brusquely getting to the point without worrying about revealing her attempted eavesdropping. "What's going on?"

Kairi and Dakota looked up in surprise, the former's eyes narrowing in distrust, while the latter's eyes widened in apprehension. They were already tense, and that only confirmed that there was indeed a problem.

Dakota spoke first, her tone clipped, "Iyo got pulled into a meeting with management."

Rhea blinked in surprise. Nothing good could come of that, given the pair's body language. "About what?"

"The match," Kairi answered, her voice steadier than Dakota's. She, like Iyo, was a woman of relatively few words - in fact, Rhea wasn’t

sure Kairi had ever directed a full sentence her way. Though, for such a brutalist in the ring, she usually had a warm and trusting air about her. Now, her aura was guarded, even as she explained openly, "No one knew her plan. Everyone's confused."

Rhea hadn't considered that. Truthfully, she hadn't thought much further than the fact she needed help, and Iyo had provided it - they shared an animosity for Liv, wasn't that enough? Clearly not, if her own friends hadn't seen it coming. While they had interfered in each other's matches before, Rhea realized that the outcome to that night's match truly provided no benefit to Iyo at all.

The Australian scowled as she considered the situation. If that was the case, crowd enthusiasm or not, the powers that be would not like Iyo muddling a narrative they had crafted carefully around the roster's interpersonal issues. Like the others, she didn't know entirely why Iyo would put herself in the line of fire, but what if it had been out of a sense of loyalty to her? Being punished for trying to protect her didn't sit right with Rhea. Management needed a reason that could be marketed to the masses. If Iyo didn't have one, she was screwed - and a suspension now, after everything she had been through, would be catastrophic. For that matter, after all the injuries Rhea had endured from getting jumped without anyone in her metaphorical and literal corner, hell would freeze over if she would let her one potential ally go to the executioner's block.

"I'll handle it, " she declared. The remainder of Damage Ctrl blinked at her in moderate surprise, a question clearly beginning to form on Dakota's lips that she seemingly thought better of.

"You better not make it worse," the Kiwi threatened instead.

Rhea nodded seriously, careful to tamp down the full feeling of fury that was climbing her throat. "I wouldn't dare."

Hunter hadn't said a word while the rest of the meeting room execs took turns expressing their utter displeasure regarding the night's events. They had failed to provide a translator, so Iyo couldn't quite keep up with all the intimate details, but she was sure she had understood the broad strokes.

"We have a hard enough time keeping the rest of the roster in line, do we have to start worrying about Damage Ctrl getting in the way of all our scheduled matches again?" Adam Pearce had led the charge.

An older man Iyo didn't recognize shifted his weight forward onto the heavy wood of the table. He had the classic, shark-like looks of a promoter, supported by the low rumble he spoke with, "The last time your group started jumping into other scheduled matches, the reception was not good." Iyo stayed quiet about how tonight, the crowd had roared her name as though eagerly awaiting her involvement.

"You don't have the threatening aura of a wrestler who should be beating people with sticks," a blonde woman who Iyo did recognize as a ‘character development’ marketing specialist, whatever that meant, piped up. "I tell Liv the same thing. Leave the dirty work to the tougher wrestlers." That one was hard to ignore, Iyo's nose crinkling in revulsion. She had been in the industry for eighteen years, and defeated every one of those so-called 'tougher wrestlers' she encountered with ease.

"Your involvement and efforts were appreciated while Rhea was off, but you really need to focus on picking the right battles now," a trainer that looked nearly half of Iyo's age offered.

It was hard to feel that she owed anyone in the room a single thing at that point. As the dictating to her drew to a close, she let the silence stretch across the table uncomfortably. For those that supposedly wanted to know her reasoning for interrupting another wrestler's match, they sure hadn't provided any opportunity to say much of anything. Pearce shifted uncomfortably as the tension festered. Levesque, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed, deep in contemplation as though he hadn't listened to a thing anyone in the room had said up until that point.

There wasn't anything to say. Nothing that would help, anyhow. The truth was rather simple. Iyo was pissed off at her own failings and wanted to prove to herself she was a threat. The suits at the table has already determined her fate anyhow, so what did any amount of defence matter?

"We should talk penalties --" the promoter began, just as the door to the meeting room slammed open with all the gentleness of a hurricane.

Iyo watched as all the heads in the room snapped on a swivel to the entrance, barring her own and the CCO's. She did turn, albeit slowly, not startled by the interruption nor willing to shoot sharp nerve pains down her still healing neck and back just to sate her curiosity.

Spinning her chair 180 degrees, the Japanese woman wasn't particularly surprised to see Rhea glowering there, but she was somewhat taken by the minuscule signs of worry in the way the larger woman gripped the door as she locked eyes with Iyo. She hadn't even taken the chance to change out of her ring gear - face still splattered with gore, a cut on her forehead just beginning to crust over on its own.

"You better have a goddamned good reason for trying to stonewall me out of this meeting." Rhea cursed, stepping into the room and slamming the door back shut behind her. The Eradicator spun Iyo's chair back into a forward-facing position, leaning along its back possessively. "I'm not about to let you all punish my tag partner for helping me."

"Tag partner?" Pearce asked incredulously, his eyes narrowing at the two women. "Is this true?" Levesque's eyebrows raised, leaning back in his chair with arms crossed - his first reaction to any of the meeting's events.

"Yes," Iyo confirmed, the words coming out of her mouth before her mind had even caught up to the fact that she was going along with whatever lie Rhea was trying to spin. She tried to imagine the look Kairi would give her when she was told that the Sky Pirates had been dissolved without any discussion at all. Would Damage Ctrl understand the position she was in, or count this a betrayal on her part?

The Australian gave her shoulder a supportive squeeze before continuing. "You've seen us interacting and cooperating the last several weeks. We were still discussing how it would work, but Raquel's appearance forced matters. No better time to announce our partnership than during the thick of it?"

The character development specialist shook her head in disbelief. "Did you not think to inform the company at any point?"

Iyo's hackles rose. She was somewhat used to being talked down to, but enough was enough. "I wanted to tell Kairi first. But I couldn't let Rhea fight alone."

Rhea grunted her agreement. "Wouldn't that look bad if I got my shit caved in today, and next week we're trying to debut our partnership?"

"That's not the point!" the promoter protested, his face incredulous. "We're supposed to push our big name stars. Damage Ctrl has a history

of --"

"Damage Ctrl has a history of doing what they're paid to, which is to put on a damn good show, often to their own physical detriment. They give more to this company than anyone else, and you know it. Did you not hear the reactions? Are you really going to pass up an opportunity to push to new heights because you, unlike the audience, won't recognize talent when you see it?" Rhea scoffed, moving to stand right beside Iyo's chair, laying her arm around its back protectively. The fluorescent meeting room lights glinted menacingly off of her canines - her eyes carrying the exact same expression they had in the ring. Her blood-spattered face added well to the impression of a wolf about to strike. "Is the problem that it wasn't planned, or that you just don't like the person it pushes?"

The room went quiet, the trainer piping in with a hesitant, "She does work hard without complaint. Maybe we ought to consider this."

Pearce's face reddened, his hand slapping down onto the desk with a loud thud. "This is ridiculous! You two have usurped me on my own show, I won't --"

"It's a good idea," Hunter interrupted, his voice unperturbed. "You have issues controlling the rest of your roster, Adam. Iyo has never had issues following directions when pertinent - her judgment is fairly sound. Do you really feel that they don't reflect each other's strengths?"

Iyo watched, wide-eyed, as the bravado deflated out of the general manager. The rest of the table avoided Levesque's gaze, as though they had suddenly realized that perhaps his early silence hadn't suggested agreement with their assessment of the situation. She could feel the slight shake through the back of her chair as Rhea chuckled quietly to herself, evidently pleased by the mood shift in the room.

"Would you have me sign off on this as though it were one of our ideas?"

"Why not?" Levesque leaned back in his chair, fingers folded together over his barrel of a chest. "Our viewership is tiring of this feud's stagnation. I'm not proposing they go straight for the tag titles. But it is beginning to land badly - one week, Rhea manages to defeat Liv, Raquel, and Dom singlehandedly - the next, they injure her badly enough she misses weeks of planned shows. This pairing is well-received, it makes sense, and it fixes many of our current issues. I

don't look gift horses in the mouth."

The Japanese woman released the breath she was holding. It was an odd sensation to realize that the company's chief creative officer was watching her back. She still wasn't quite sure that he wasn't just bored of the same feuds dragging on too long and looking for a welcome out - but the relief was palpable.

"Fine," Adam acquiesced. "We'll give this... partnership a chance. But I want it in writing, and it goes through our booking team. I'm done with unannounced surprises."

"Yes, sir," Rhea drawled, a sly smirk spreading across her face that was nonetheless almost entirely sincere. She patted Iyo's shoulder, the Japanese woman gazing up at her in bewilderment. How quickly the tides turned when she had an intimidating goth by her side. "Just have whatever documentation you need sent to our hotel rooms. Iyo's in her preferred language." The tall woman gestured to the conspicuous lack of an interpreter, which did earn an apologetic tilt of the head from Hunter. The Japanese woman had to appreciate that about Rhea - even in their NXT days, she was careful to ensure there was clear communication whenever they had dealings with one another.

With that, Rhea gently pulled the back of Iyo's chair, signalling for her to stand, following at the smaller woman's heel. The door clicked shut behind them, leaving a tense meeting room in their wake. Iyo was sure that wasn't the last they would hear about the night's events, but at least it seemed that most of the organization's frustration was now focused inwards.

"I need to talk to my girls," Iyo stated plainly, looking up at her supposed partner in gratitude. "They will not be happy. But thank you."

Rhea's lips quirked upwards slightly, her arms folded across her chest casually in a feigned shrug. Iyo unconsciously reached up to fold away the younger woman's bangs, carefully inspecting the partially hidden forehead wound. She wondered how Rhea had found out about her predicament so quickly, but thought better than to ask.

The younger woman's nose wrinkled up as she winced away almost imperceptibly. "No big deal. You save my ass, I save yours. Just now it's going to be a formal agreement."

"I could have a worse partner." The Japanese woman nodded, letting her hands drop apologetically. "After we should talk."

A look of slow realization passed across Rhea's face, the Australian wheeling around to take stock of their surroundings. She found what she was looking for quickly, snatching a marker from the check-in board noting the night's scheduled matches. Without hesitation, Rhea grabbed Iyo's arm, quickly scribbling down a few numbers along it. The older woman flushed - it wasn't the first and certainly not the last time she would receive such treatment, but usually there were far different circumstances at play. "My phone number and hotel room," Rhea explained. "In case things run late. I'm a night owl anyway."

Iyo cleared her throat a bit uncomfortably, pulling her arm gently away from Rhea. She thought about trying to crack a joke that Rhea really ought to be more careful about suddenly grabbing another wrestler like that, lest she end up in a reverse grapple. Then thought to clarify that she already had Rhea's contact info, as rarely used as it was. The moment stretched long however, so Iyo simply nodded instead. "Deal... partner."

"Partners," Rhea agreed, giving a casual, albeit awkward wave farewell as she headed off to her own changing room, no doubt to wash off the sweat, dust, and gore she had accumulated.

With Rhea gone, a strange feeling of dread once more settled into Iyo's stomach as she made her way back to her group members. It wasn't a feeling that came with bad premonitions, but the feeling of being in over her head. As well as Iyo could typically read the younger woman, Rhea was still a wild card. While they certainly knew each other well enough due to the years of working in parallel, their paths had only crossed a few brief times - and each time saw Rhea taking the role of a deadly reactive force. There was no doubt they could work off of each others' strengths, but what of their weaknesses? Rhea was, simply put, not a tag team wrestler. She didn't know how to let things go and trust someone else to have her back.

While that feeling wasn't unknown to Iyo, she had always been able to trust at least one other person throughout her career. Betrayal happened, but it was rare that Iyo didn't sniff the turncoats out first. She wasn't concerned with Rhea turning on her - rather, she was concerned that there would be issues with that trust running both ways. How long would it take before Rhea instinctively began gravitating to their side of the ring, how long before she was setting up for one of Iyo's finishers without thinking about it?

For the time being, she had to imagine that however long this partnership lasted, much of it would be spent walking on eggshells

around the larger woman. She could only hope that their questionable decision didn't backfire and damage her relationship with her true, long-term allies.

As she entered their shared dressing room, Iyo found Kairi and Dakota waiting for her expectantly. The aura of worry was palpable, and Iyo felt as though her heart would rip in two. "I'm sorry," she began, initiating what would prove to be a long, difficult conversation with two of her dearest friends.

It was nearly 4am by the time Iyo's knock sounded on her hotel room door. Rhea's eyelids were beginning to grow heavy, but she had forced herself to stay awake, occupying herself by chatting with friends and family back home whose schedules rarely aligned with her own so well these days. As the hours dragged on, she began to wonder if Iyo had somehow decided to renege on their shoddy plan - or perhaps had gotten pulled into another abrupt interrogation. Rhea imagined those suits trying once more to pin some kind of blame on the Japanese woman, needling her to tell them the truth behind her actions. Fortunately, the knock came before she had much more chance to overthink, Rhea springing up to answer before there was any chance for Iyo to back out.

She hadn't expected to find Iyo looking so exhausted, the Japanese woman's darkened bangs hanging limply around the lighter than usual pallor of her skin. She had changed from her earlier gear into a pair of sweats and a t-shirt that nearly hung to her knees, but her face was still covered in makeup. It was apparent the older woman hadn't taken any time to shower or eat since Rhea had seen her a few hours prior.

Rhea stepped back to let Iyo inside. "You look rough. Do you want to just go get some rest?" she asked. Iyo shook her head, avoiding eye contact as she trudged inside stubbornly.

"Sleep is for the dead," Iyo responded, her voice tired, "but food is good." Rhea was relieved to note the Japanese woman didn't seem to be angry.

The taller woman nodded, stepping away to locate the hotel's room service menu. Iyo followed sluggishly behind, making her way to the room's kettle, rifling through their sparse selection of tea bags. Rhea had thought about putting on some coffee earlier on, but decided against it in favour of an energy drink for herself, not knowing what Iyo favoured. "What do you fancy? They've got like six pages to this

thing."

"Burger is ok." Her response was short and simple, accent slipping out a little more prominently than usual. The exhaustion emanated from her in waves.

Without thinking about it, Rhea put down the menu, stepping up behind Iyo and grabbing the kettle from her. "Hey. I'll put it on. Go take a shower, ok? My makeup remover is on the counter. Help yourself to it and my good shampoo."

The shorter woman reacted slowly, turning to blink up at Rhea like an adorable sloth. The Australian took her by the shoulders, gently guiding her into the en-suite and closing the door behind her. If the older woman had any complaints, she was too drained to voice them.

Rhea hoped she hadn't overstepped, but Iyo really did look like she needed a bit of a pick-me-up, and being six hours out of a match without washing the gunk off was not good for anyone's mental well-being. With a sigh, Rhea set about boiling the water, grabbing one of her good travel mugs for Iyo in lieu of the hotel cups which had been last washed god knows when.

Five minutes later, she was on the phone with the front desk, ordering a prime rib burger. She wasn't entirely sure what Iyo's preferred side was, so requested all of them, reasoning that she could just eat whatever the other woman didn't. On impulse, she also ordered them both an ice cream cobbler. Rhea wanted something to occupy herself while they talked, and by the looks of it, Iyo could use a little sugar anyhow.

By the time Iyo came out of the bathroom, she looked like a new person, the blood pumping through her again. She was wearing the same clothes, but her face was freshly washed and lightly flushed, her damp hair let out of its usual small braids. Rhea had seen Iyo backstage barefaced and casual often enough, but it was a bit different seeing her in closer proximity. She looked younger, somehow - but no less striking than usual.

Rhea passed her the mug of tea, having made sure that the water would be the right temperature and the bag had been steeped according to instructions. While Rhea wasn't fussy with her coffee, she wasn't sure whether Iyo was similarly relaxed about her drink of choice, and didn't want her efforts to help be in vain. To her relief, Iyo sipped happily at the mug, the pair settling down at the oft-neglected

sitting area situated near the room's sole window.

"Thank you," Iyo began, her voice less strained than before. "I think Damage Ctrl is done."

Rhea's head swam with the rather straightforward news. Was that all Iyo had to say about something that monumental? If this were her, she would be tearing this room apart in anguish - or at least pumping iron at the nearest gym until she couldn't think anymore. How could the woman just be sitting there, declaring such terrible news to the person who inadvertently caused that turmoil?

"What?" was all she could manage to muster up, suddenly unsure of what to do with her hands. Or her face, for that matter. Would Iyo suddenly snap if Rhea didn't look apologetic enough, or would she throw a punch the second she sensed any kind of pity? Instead, Rhea balled her fists up beneath the table and stared into the murky, streetlight-speckled night outside.

"They were not happy." Iyo sighed, "Dakota will be ok, she is just afraid I will be like Bayley. Kairi is... complicated." She shook her head as she explained. Though the older woman was in many ways unfamiliar to her, Rhea could tell she was struggling to find the right words to express what she wanted to.

It was odd. While the younger woman didn't know Damage Ctrl intimately, from their sparse interactions, Dakota had seemed so protective of the others, like she would be the one to stubbornly stick her heels in against any change. But Kairi had always seemed to be Iyo's other half. Rhea had remembered during the inaugural Mae Young Classic hearing about how Kairi was even more determined to win because Iyo was meant to be there with her. And win she had. The following year, when Iyo had pinned Rhea in the semi-finals, the woman had been hard pressed to disagree with the sentiment. They had been a fixture of WWE ever since, the two always seeming to reunite against all odds. Perhaps that was why Kairi was taking the news as a slight against herself.

"This isn't forever," Rhea promised, not knowing how else to reassure her new partner. Festering resentments wouldn't get them where they needed to be. "I can tell them it's my fault, I was just trying to-"

"No." The Japanese woman shook her head. "It is my fault. I didn't think about them when I went out there tonight. That is why they are upset. I didn't think of them at all."

Rhea ruminated on that surprising truth. That was something she had never considered. Perhaps never would. Was that what made the Judgment Day different from Damage Ctrl? For all their other surface similarities, the Judgment Day fell apart precisely because with their no-leaders structure, everyone was simply out for themselves. The second an opportunity presented itself to further herself, Rhea had taken it. The same could be said for every one of the members, past or current. She never asked herself if charging headlong into a fight would impact anyone else but her. That attitude hadn't ultimately changed since becoming a lone wolf, only strengthened.

No one could touch her so long as the primary concern for Rhea was her own well-being alone.

There were downsides to it, of course, but at least she never was stuck in the wallowing pit of self-blame that Iyo seemed to be slipping into. Were friends really worth that much?

"Well, you saved my ass tonight," Rhea finally replied. "I'll be damn sure to repay that debt, whether you come with backup or not. I hope either way this pans out, you won't regret it."

Iyo took a long, thoughtful draught from her mug. When she did respond, the younger woman noted that she carefully avoided her circuitous question. What she did say confused Rhea all the more. "Kairi worries I will be lost in you. They think I think of you more than them. They're wrong, I didn't think at all. I only cared about hurting Liv." She pushed her mug to the side, stretching her arms out in front of her to the point that her fingertips nearly grazed Rhea's hunched shoulders. "This is still all I think of."

"Ditto," was all Rhea could think to say. What the hell did she mean by 'lost in you'? It was far from the first time she had been confused by Iyo's way of expressing herself, but usually she didn't care to try to interpret past the initial statement. Perhaps she meant that Kairi was concerned Rhea would turn on her, or use her - but as a decorated veteran, it was certain Iyo would see such a thing coming from a mile away. Especially after all she had been through. For that matter, Rhea was as transparent as a glass of water. She couldn't hide her intentions if she tried.

Before she could talk herself into or out of pressing for further explanation, a knock at the door announced the arrival of their food - or, mostly Iyo's. The Japanese woman started to stand, then startled, patting at herself. The universal body language of forgetting one's

wallet. Rhea laughed, and stood to answer the door in her stead. As though she'd order for Iyo and then leave her with the bill.

"Thank you," Rhea greeted the hotel staff member as warmly as she could as she collected the food. "Charge to the room, I'll settle up on checkout. Put down an appropriate tip." The server nodded in understanding, returning the words of thanks before leaving.

Rhea brought the food over, settling back on her bed to flick through late night TV. Iyo dug into the burger after thanking Rhea, looking pleased with her selection. She made a slight sound of excitement when the channel surfing landed on Law & Order, so Rhea let it play. The older woman was a fast eater, but it was clear that it wasn't due to usual habit alone - she was simply starving. Rhea made sure to point out Iyo's dessert to her as she tucked in to her own. The Australian was satisfied that her efforts at cheering up Iyo were successful. The older woman was smiling again, light returning to her eyes.

"Not too late to back out," Rhea offered, a rare feeling of guilt emerging for her part in Iyo's troubles. "We could run some one-sided schtick, put you over more as a face and drum up my whole anything for vengeance angle." Truthfully, she was more than a little anxious about the arrangement herself. Wrestling solo covered up a whole bunch of weaknesses that were otherwise exposed by an ally's skillset making apparent what their partner simply couldn't do. She had seen damn near every match Iyo had wrestled in since joining the WWE - nevermind those prior - and the performances Rhea felt confident about replicating were in the low single digits.

The crimson-haired wrestler let her spoon fall to the table with a clatter, swivelling to face Rhea all too seriously. "No. This will be good for us. A new challenge."

"There's a lot of work ahead of us. You know I don't do this much," Rhea warned, rare insecurity clawing through her stomach.

Iyo shrugged. "You will learn."

The younger woman was surprised by the conviction behind the Japanese woman's response. There was no questioning her. It was a far cry from the exhausted woman who had walked through her door an hour ago. With her mind made up, there was no talking her down. It was an aspect of Iyo's personality Rhea could admire, but one that she was sure they would clash over sooner or later.

"Ok," Rhea conceded for the moment, a smile creeping back onto her face. "Let's kick some ass then. Partners."

Iyo nodded, turning back to the TV. "Partners."

Chapter End Notes

feel free to leave kudos or comments, or just go follow me on bluesky and watch me lose my shit at every iyo promo from now til WM.

Chapter 2: battle

The beginning of said partnership was, for the most part, an unmitigated disaster. With paperwork signed locking them to the arrangement for the near future, the company had immediately scheduled them for wall-to-wall training matches. The trainers who served as their opponents worked together with businesslike efficiency - picking apart every single one of the duo's inherent weaknesses.

No disqualification street matches were one thing - but once the very foundation of having to tag out came into play, the train fell off the tracks. Rhea was, true to her words, a rookie to the tag division. She hoarded time in the ring, treating a swap out as an emergency retreat rather than a continuation of a shared brutal offense. Several times, Iyo reached out for a clear follow-up, seeing the possible combinations and windows of weakness in her mind's eye, and was left ignored. Clearly, the same thoughts never passed Rhea's mind, as she circled to face their own side of the ring only when she was in danger of being pinned.

What was worse was that some of her tags, desperate as they were, sent Iyo in to the slaughter. The amount of swaps that took place were few, and Iyo's ring time scarce, yet she was the one taking the majority of the pins after Rhea, exhausted to the point of uselessness, retreated away from a 2-on-1. There was never any opportunity for Rhea to assist so they could turn the tables. Even if Iyo could manage to survive long enough for a return tag, the larger woman was still lagging behind, and often missed Iyo's attempts to tag her in. Though many years had passed since their first attempt at tag-teaming back on NXT, and Rhea was no longer trying to steal a title off of the Japanese woman’s shoulder, her natural tendencies hadn’t changed at all.

And like predicted, Rhea defaulted to favouring the neutral corners of the ring, so Iyo couldn't even steal a tag off of her partner's back. Overall, the Australian was so focused on what was happening in the centre of the ring that she didn't notice Iyo's efforts at all, a situation their trainers took advantage of every time. Iyo wasn't sure how to break it to Rhea that she wasn't the sole fighter, and that they needed to start working together, not simply as two individuals who rotated when times were dire. The attempts at communication she did make were usually rebuffed by Rhea insisting she could handle things. The post-match reviews with their opponents pointing out the same problems fared no better, Rhea shutting down into a silent, brooding

mess. Iyo, meanwhile, clocked all the more hours of endurance training to compensate.

There was one relief - their in-ring chemistry was still on point. When they both happened to be in the ring at the same time - though usually by accident, or Iyo's efforts alone - the moves came naturally. Their familiarity with each other's style meant that team manoeuvres were executed flawlessly and without any apparent signal between the pair. Whenever those moments occurred, the flow of a match would change. While few wins occurred, the ones that did were devastating, flashy landslides - with better consistency, there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Unfortunately, with time short, the company was growing impatient. They were set to truly debut at a live event, with only a couple of weeks to make the necessary improvements. As the end of the week drew to a close, and Monday Night RAW loomed, Iyo racked her brain for a solution to their loosely scheduled promo. There were demands for some interim explanation for Iyo's interference the previous week, some suggestion of allegiance that would drum up excitement for the to-be-announced tag team match against Liv and Raquel to secure contention for the tag team championship.

There was also the issue that while Iyo was still a member of Damage Ctrl on paper, she and the others hadn't truly communicated since the previous week's fallout. But maybe they could use that to their advantage. Dakota and Kairi were powerful tag partners in their own right - why not express their trepidation towards Rhea and Iyo's new partnership on the show in the form of a match? If they had no hope of obscuring their weaknesses by Monday, they may as well face a team willing to broadcast them. Iyo knew the one thing that could drive Rhea to improve rapidly was that form of public failure.

But would her friends do her that favour when their last meeting had ended in such a tense manner? Kairi's words still echoed in Iyo's mind.

We could have attacked Liv at any point, but you went out alone into Rhea's match because you wanted her approval. No, you don't want Liv's respect. You want Rhea's. But you don't think when it comes to her, because she doesn't respect anyone.

A doubt had emerged, growing in strength with every missed tag opportunity that Kairi was quite right. Perhaps Rhea didn't see her as an equal because she inherently didn't think Iyo had more to offer than she did. Even if she managed to convince Damage Ctrl to take

the match, there wasn't much of a next step. She'd prove Kairi right, watch them dismantle the Australian, all as Rhea refused to swap out with Iyo because she still saw herself, beaten down and outnumbered as superior to both Iyo and her opponents.

Yet, this was the only hint of a plan she had. Whatever Rhea's own thoughts were, she didn't voice them readily. Though initially, Iyo was the cautious one, she was beginning to suspect Rhea regretted agreeing to the partnership. The younger woman had all but shut down into an unending routine of gym-drills-repeat, as though her strength alone was what was keeping them from success. Their communication was minimal, despite the trainers and Iyo's best efforts to point out what truly needed to be worked on - which had absolutely nothing to do with the physical, and everything to do with the cerebral aspects of their partnership.

If Rhea insisted upon learning through public failure, then that would simply have to be arranged.

On Friday night, as Smackdown aired, Iyo called her friends. It was the first time they had spoken since their argument. The mood was tense, but not unfriendly, as Iyo explained the issues they were facing and her plans to set change in action. Dakota was dubious, but supportive - realizing what failure might spell for Iyo - and while Kairi agreed, it was clear she felt negatively towards the arrangement. Iyo could only be grateful that they were willing to still go to bat for her, even if she suspected they didn't have completely altruistic intentions.

In the end, the conversation had been a huge weight off of Iyo's shoulders. Her friends didn't love the situation, but they didn't hate her, either. Mostly, they were concerned that the immediate consequences of Iyo's actions would escalate into something much worse for her career. And, if the quickly approaching show didn't go to plan, their worries would soon be proven right.

Monday night came quicker than either of the women had prepared for. Iyo's heart was pounding in her chest, her nerves spiking higher and higher as their promo time approached. Rhea had been unusually quiet, and had been avoiding her since the start of the day. They hadn't even gone through their usual warm-up together. Iyo couldn't help but worry that the younger woman was having second thoughts - not that she could blame her, given their off-screen track record thus far.

"Hey," Rhea greeted her, pulling open her dressing room door just as Iyo was preparing to knock. "You ready?"

"Always," Iyo replied, avoiding Rhea's dark gaze. The taller woman reached out to clap her shoulder reassuringly. The contact was unexpected, but welcome. Only then did Iyo meet her eyes, surprised to find them tender.

"I know things have sucked. And that I've been a stubborn jerk. But whatever happens, we can face it. Even if we have to go heel to do it."

The Japanese woman's lips tightened, her stomach churning. Kairi and Dakota had presented the match to Pearce on Saturday morning, insisting they had unfinished business that could only be resolved in the ring. They had handled the pre-filmed promo on their own. As a result, Iyo didn't know the full extent of the plans for their segment - only that they had managed to convince the general manager to opt for timed swap-outs rather than tag-ins to provide the newer team with a handicap. The finer details were up in the air even now. Iyo didn't love that Rhea's first instincts when it came to uncertainty were to potentially fight dirty against the women who were still dear friends to her.

"No," she vetoed simply, holding the taller woman's intimidating, yet confused gaze.

"They kicked you out of the group, Iyo," Rhea reminded, a hint of exasperation creeping into her tone. Is that how she viewed the situation? So much simpler than the complex truth of the matter, the results of lengthy talks revealing what different pages Iyo and her old teammates were on. But if she and Damage Ctrl were on different pages, she and Rhea were on different books entirely.

Iyo sighed, "We decided together. They are my friends, and I will fight them with respect. That is what they will give us in return."

Rhea leaned her shoulder against the doorjamb, the Eradicator beginning to creep into her mannerisms. "Yet they happily proposed the match. Are real friends so eager to kick the shit out of you?" Her voice was haughty and infuriating, never-mind how far off base she was.

Irritation began to take hold, the Japanese woman's chin tilted up defiantly. *They only want to knock some sense into us* , Iyo didn't say, *and show how pointless this entire arrangement is* . Instead, she shoved Rhea away from the door with a quick burst of movement, causing her

to stumble a step back into her dressing room- coming back upright with fists at the ready. The very posture revealed Rhea's true feelings all too plainly. Did she really trust Iyo so little to expect a fight so early?

Iyo scoffed, following her in with a relaxed stance, reaching around Rhea's slightly trembling hands to instead brush the bangs from her face - taking note of the small scar developing along her hairline. She didn't miss the slight flinch from the goth, though the gesture sufficiently cut the tension, Rhea dropping her hands to hang loosely at her sides.

"Real friends don't take bullshit," Iyo chastised, making her meaning all the clearer in hopes Rhea would understand her feelings, "and you are bullshit."

By Rhea's slack-jawed expression, Iyo could tell that she wasn't expecting such a statement. Furthermore, she didn't have the younger woman's faith - but if their pending match was to work, even with Damage Ctrl's help, Iyo needed to make her expectations of Rhea clear. She wouldn't have their debut ruined by a pointless and spiteful feud that could be avoided.

"You can fight with me, on my terms, or you can fight all of us - I will win again, and will be fired," Iyo explained clearly, her voice dripping with the kind of strict admonishment that hadn't been summoned out of her since she last mentored younger wrestlers during her Stardom days. "Which is it?"

Rhea stared down at her, lips parting slightly, her brow furrowed as though she were about to argue further. She abruptly snapped her jaw closed once more and stepped back, the distance between them now considerable. The taller woman nodded slowly, seemingly unable to find her words for the first time Iyo could remember. "Your terms," Rhea agreed, jaw tense.

Iyo felt the unsure lump in her stomach lift. If there was one thing the Eradicator was, it was argumentative. Yet, she had ceded this to Iyo - a favour to eventually be repaid, certainly. Or perhaps she was finally taking their partnership seriously.

"Good," Iyo replied. "Let's win."

The pair made their way through the backstage area in a tense silence, but at least it wasn't hostile as Rhea had feared. They lingered outside

the monitor room, watching the minutes till their time tick down in silence. Through draped curtains, they caught glimpses of the camera feeds, showing the further breakdown of the New Day's partnership, the toxic and distrustful energy sickeningly infectious. Rhea busied herself with a few last-minute push-ups to keep her blood pumping and her mind off of the survival instincts that surged to the surface every time Iyo fixed her with that withering, disapproving gaze that assured her she wasn't good enough.

As Kofi and Xavier exited the arena, *Still the Baddest* began to pump through the arena speakers. Instinctively, Iyo began to move into the monitor room, only to be held back by a production assistant. Rhea winced, seeing the very moment that the woman realized that song was no longer her cue. She vividly remembered hearing *The Other Side* the first time after SummerSlam, and could still recall the fine for destroying her dressing room that accompanied it. The taller woman placed what she hoped was a comforting hand on the small of Iyo's back, the two of them watching through the curtains as Dakota and Kairi entered in her stead. Dakota spotted them and shot them an uneasy thumbs up - Kairi, on the other hand, was laser focused.

It was surreal, especially considering visually, they still all looked to be a part of the same team. Rhea's every instinct reacted to them as a unit, so she could only imagine how conflicted Iyo felt for what was, on paper, a trade down. The Genius of the Sky's record spoke for itself - a more decorated tag team wrestler scarcely existed. Yet, she was saddled together with someone who couldn't even manage to fight back her issues long enough to remember she *was* a part of a team.

Rhea barely realized she was still holding Iyo by the time the PA gestured them in. The woman shot forward eagerly - previous false start having clearly set her adrenaline coursing. They were nearly through the tunnel when the confusing beginning cry of *Demon In Your Dreams* surged the arena to life. She couldn't see Iyo's expression through the darkness, and didn't want to - this was something they hadn't even begun to discuss with everything else going on. Was this what WWE had decided upon, that Iyo was simply Rhea's sidekick, rather than the other way around? Perhaps they had simply run out of time to consider alternatives, but she couldn't give them that much credit.

Was sharing her theme song better or worse than entering separately when it came to tag team chemistry? God's sake, they had to figure out fucking marketing for themselves now too.

So many thoughts bounced around Rhea's head that she entirely missed her opening cue, entering the arena just in time to see Iyo performing her entrance stomp in her stead. A flicker of momentary embarrassment passed over Rhea, quickly dissipating as she heard the jovial roaring of the crowd - an absurd, enamoured smile flickering over her face as she watched Iyo wave her arms about. Well fuck it, her regular entrance was ruined, but she may as well play into the Iyo the Eradicator angle that the more experienced wrestler had improvised.

Scooping Iyo up, Rhea carried the gleeful woman bridal-style to the ring, the pair mouthing out the lyrics to her theme song in tandem and tried not to think of the coming fight. As they closed in, she could see Dakota attempting to obscure a smirk. Kairi was still stone-faced, a fact Rhea hoped Iyo hadn't yet noticed. She set the smaller woman down gently, hopping up to the ring apron to kneel along it in her usual intimidating manner - this time holding her position and lifting the ropes to allow Iyo to tumble in before her. The Genius of the Sky wasted no time, turning back to regard Rhea with a sharp, reassuring gaze. It held the very same energy as the look Iyo had given her a week ago, just before throwing the kendo stick Rhea's way and setting up for her match-winning moonsault. Confident and in-control, just minus the blazing fury directed at Liv.

No words were said as Rhea slipped into the ring, offering Iyo a fistbump as the Eradicator took the starting position without any further discussion. This time, there was no hesitation between them as the Japanese wrestler took position in her corner.

It wasn't that Rhea was now sure of their partnership, rather, it was that Iyo seemed to be. That was enough.

Kairi took the starting position on the opposite side of the ring. From her periphery, the Eradicator couldn't help but notice the way Iyo's posture shifted slightly. Previously, the shorter woman had seemed at ease, but a familiar nervousness quickly settled over her. Her eyes were fixed on the older woman across the ring, a conflicted intensity to the gaze Rhea couldn't entirely place. The closest emotion she could describe it as was guilt, though that didn't quite cover the feelings of melancholy summoned by the look. There certainly was no trace of the animosity she had seen when Iyo had confronted Liv the week before. Rhea began to doubt if her partner would be able to lay hands on Kairi at all.

The bell rang. The Pirate Princess was quick on her feet, darting

around Rhea in a circle, sizing her up. Rhea's eyes narrowed, her arms tensing slightly as she readied herself to grapple the woman. Passively, her brain racked itself for the unconscious strategies she prided herself on - but came up empty, realizing she couldn't even recall the last time she had wrestled her clearly. Suddenly, Kairi lunged forward, knocking into her and trying to bring her down to the mat. Rhea fought back against the momentum, lifting Kairi to attempt a suplex, but found the nimble woman slipping through her grasp. Kairi's legs bracketed the larger woman's hips so she instead only slammed herself back-first into the mat, breath exiting her in a rush.

For a single moment, Rhea caught the cold anger of Kairi's glare. A moment later, she was treated to a pair of boots in the ribs. All she could do was roll out of the ring in self-preservation. The nature of the timed swaps was now rearing its ugly head - as the challengers and more experienced pair, Damage Ctrl would swap out first, three minutes into the match. Rhea would have to sustain six minutes outside of her wheelhouse before she would find any relief.

By the time Rhea had regained her footing, Kairi was attempting to throw her into the barricade. This time, the Australian was prepared to reverse the attack, the Pirate Princess' back slamming into the steel barriers. She attempted to make space, rolling back into the ring. Iyo looked a little less than pleased with her tactics, but at the very least Dakota still seemed neutral - clearly expecting such treatment. Rhea's gaze shifted to the clock displayed on screens above them, watching as it ticked closer and closer to the three minute mark. Once the swap happened, she could get back into her comfort zone, and her natural power would carry the match.

As Kairi pursued her back into the ring, Rhea attempted to keep her distance from the ropes, knowing the dangers of trying to deal with high flyers within their preferred territories. Unfortunately, Kairi was quite a versatile wrestler, using her speed to get back into close-quarters combat before Rhea could connect. For a woman of her stature, Kairi hit like a brick, and was just as difficult to keep a hold on. Rhea made it through just over two and a half minutes before finally managing to grab hold of Kairi's neck, indelicately flinging her away into the ropes in her impatience. Though momentarily stunned, Rhea had little time to prepare for what she knew was coming. The Pirate Princess bounced back off the ropes, a spinning strike with her elbow sending the Eradicator careening back.

The bell rang as Rhea's back hit the mat, treating her to an excruciatingly painful view of Dakota launching Kairi into an InSane

elbow. It took everything in the younger woman's power to kick out as winded as she was. She knew Kairi was capable, but she had a fire burning in her that Rhea hadn't been prepared for. A part of her wanted to cry out to Iyo, asking her how the fuck they were supposed to win like this. Yet, as she circled back to their corner, the woman seemed pensive, but not overly concerned.

Thankfully, Kairi didn't linger long in the ring, leaving Dakota to face off with the battered goth. Rhea breathed a sigh of relief. This was an opponent she had been in the ring with countless times - albeit one that she had been pinned by before. The way Dakota circled her was comparatively relaxed, however, subtly allowing Rhea to regain her breath. She didn't expect the kindness to last long, Dakota's competitive nature would come back in full force once she felt the Eradicator was on an even playing field. Rhea tried not to feel too guilty for taking advantage of that fact, rushing the older woman while she still had the opportunity.

Dakota was quick to respond, spinning Rhea around and kicking her forward into the ropes. This time, Rhea was ready, using her momentum towards the ropes to spring back towards the brunette, catching her in a cutter. As she staggered back to her feet, Rhea grabbed hold of her, attempting to set up for her signature Riptide, but found in true Damage Ctrl fashion, the older woman managed to slip through her grasp. At least now momentum was on her side, and she managed to fling Dakota into one of the neutral corner turnbuckles.

From there, the match began to resume a reasonable flow - Rhea's strength being matched by Dakota's guile and technical skills. The two didn't manage to trade any pincounts, though Rhea thought that Dakota might have passed up at least one clear opportunity following a savage Scorpion Kick late into their brawl. Before she knew it, the bell sounded, nearly going unnoticed as the Eradicator had slipped back into her zone of focus.

It was only when that familiar crimson came streaking by her, sending Dakota to the mat with a cross-body, that Rhea remembered once more she was in a tag match. The Japanese woman was a whirlwind, a blur of kicks and punches and flips, leaving the Eradicator in the dust. Rhea's head was spinning as she took her corner, her eyes fixed on the flurry of movement that was her partner. She realized suddenly that despite turning the tides of the match, she hadn't really set Iyo up for success at all - when Kairi had swapped out with Dakota, the two of them had effectively paired to bring about a near-pinfall on a fresh

Rhea. If they could do that a mere three minutes into a match, why was it that Iyo looked as though she were starting the match anew, despite all of Rhea's efforts to weaken Dakota?

In that moment it was clear - Rhea hadn't prepared the ring for Iyo's entry at all. Had she focused on pounding Dakota into the mat in their corner of the ring, that cross-body could have been a Moonsault, and the resulting count could have been a pinfall. Four years ago, during their last official tag match together, she had been witness to a near-identical situation as Iyo had fought valiantly against Dakota to regain the traction that Rhea had lost for them. Back then, she hadn't been ready to do more than postpone a loss. That could not happen again.

The Australian was snapped from her trance by the bell ringing once more. Iyo hadn't gone easy on Dakota, and the resultant swap between Dakota and Kairi looked more like a retreat than anything. Despite their apparent upper hand, when Kairi stepped into the ring, a rare hush fell over the crowd. Forget Rhea's lack of in-ring experience with Kairi, the Sky Pirates had a storied history which hadn't resulted in competition in years. And now there they were, about to come to blows. Rhea's stomach dropped as Iyo's gaze all but glazed over, seemingly refusing to acknowledge her old partner's presence whatsoever, bringing their team's momentum to a standstill.

The same could not be said for Kairi, who set upon Iyo like a storm. Rhea felt sick - however brutal Kairi had been against her, watching her pummel Iyo into the corner was like comparing an instructional match to the main event of Wrestlemania. Gobsmacked, Rhea linked gazes with Dakota, noting the worried furrow in the other woman's brow. So she wasn't the only one to be utterly shocked by this development. For fuck's sakes, Kairi was treating Iyo the same way Rhea treated Liv. Had their new partnership really come as such a betrayal?

Kairi was relentless, her usual technical style supplemented by cold anger. Backed into the turnbuckle as she was, Iyo could only manage to shield herself from the worst of Kairi's offensive. Inevitably, she began to sag to the ground, just to be picked up and hung in a Tree of Woe. The desperation on her face was clear - but Rhea knew that she still had the energy to escape if she so wished. And yet there she hung, the resulting Marine Spike knocking her to the ground in a shockingly motionless lump.

Rhea's blood boiled as she white-knuckled the ropes- eyes flicking over to see Dakota watching the match, her jaw agape and face

colourless. While Kairi's energy had begun to lag, she wasted no time in dragging Iyo to the centre of the ring before climbing the ropes overlooking her. The seconds counted down nearly in time with Rhea's thudding heart. The Eradicator's every muscle coiled, ready to spring as Kairi crouched above Iyo, elbow poised above her like a weapon as she prepared to deliver what would be the match-ending strike.

The bell rang.

Rhea flung herself up onto the top rope as Kairi began her leap, not hesitating whatsoever as she mirrored a manoeuvre she had seen Iyo perform a million-times, spring-boarding herself off the ropes into the most urgent missile dropkick she had ever performed. She felt the impact shudder up her legs as she caught Kairi at the top of her arc - the force of the contact knocking the two of them to the ground just short of Iyo. The world had gone white. Blood pounded through the Eradicator's ears as she got to her feet, roaring furiously as she grabbed hold of Kairi.

She heard nothing, saw nothing as she delivered quite possibly the most forceful Riptide of her career.

Kairi kicked at two.

The Eradicator was stunned, seeing the Pirate Princess' eyes roll in her head as she struggled to her knees. She was in no shape to continue, yet Rhea didn't feel victorious - her every instinct screaming that danger still lurked beneath the surface of her determined foe. Turning to survey the sides of the ring, Rhea was momentarily calmed by the sight of Iyo. The smaller woman was battered and winded, but had managed to roll to the relative safety of their corner.

Six minutes. Rhea had six minutes to finish this match to ensure Iyo wouldn't be subjected to the hell it had turned into.

She stomped at Kairi's ribs, refusing to give the woman any opportunity to recover. If the older woman didn't treat her own best friend with that clemency, Rhea had no reason to be any kinder. Kairi's stubbornness was admirable, however, as she rolled to the corner, pulling herself up to her feet. That same cold fire burned in the depths of her eyes, and the Eradicator could see her plotting even in this sorry state. Rhea was quick to close the distance between them, but not fast enough to prevent Kairi from ducking out of the way. In her reckless fury, Rhea careened into the turnbuckle.

"You ruin her," Kairi hissed lowly, startling the larger woman as she

recovered. A harsh chop across Rhea's chest caught her by surprise as she rared up in pained indignation, striking back in kind. She had no time for cryptic riddles. What should have been a simple, clean match had turned into a lion's den. If not for Rhea's promise to Iyo, she would have already set to work trying to brute force her way through the match - even if she had to break Kairi's knee to do it.

The pair sized each other up once more, Kairi breaking eye contact for just a moment to shoot a glare Iyo's way. Rhea took the opportunity to shove her back towards her side of the ring. The moment she landed in her home corner, Dakota grabbed at her partner's shoulder, holding her there while they exchanged tense whispers. Rhea took the opportunity to half-circle towards her own corner, taking stock of Iyo's slowly improving condition. The woman still appeared emotionally deflated, but had at the least caught her breath and appeared physically prepared.

As the bell chimed, Dakota nearly had to pull Kairi out of the ring to take position. Their arguing had become conspicuous, the crowd having obtained a tense lull. The energy had changed. Gone was the frantic fury - in its place, a concerned methodicalness on either side as Dakota and Rhea looked to bring an end to the chaos the match had devolved into.

She wasn't given much more opportunity to think on the issue before Dakota delivered another swift Scorpion Kick to her jaw. Rhea stumbled back, the force of the Kiwi's strike forcing her back into the turnbuckle. The Eradicator's breath was knocked out of her, reeling as a second boot to the face sent her to the mat. Dakota followed her down, dragging her into a shoddy headlock that was all show and no substance.

"Pin me," she hissed into the goth's ear, long hair obscuring her speech as she feigned the effort of holding Rhea down. The larger woman schooled her expression, concealing the confusion and offense she felt as Dakota continued. "Iyo might not go for it … Kairi will destroy her if she gets back in."

After all that, Dakota expected Rhea to be satisfied with a rigged win?

"Fuck you," Rhea snarled, lashing her head back with such fury that Dakota went immediately limp, no acting required. The brunette had the decency to at least roll away as she recovered from seeing stars. Pinning Dakota wasn't a question - but they would earn it genuinely or not at all. If Iyo couldn't snap out of her stupor long enough to secure

the win, then perhaps Kairi was correct. Or perhaps Rhea just simply hadn't made a compelling enough case to prove otherwise.

As the Kiwi got to her feet once more, Rhea recalled their brief conversation alone the night of Iyo's loss against Liv. *She's the toughest lady I know, but the hardest on herself. She doesn't need to deal with someone else's expectations of her on top of that.* That was bullshit. The ones expecting so much of Iyo, for good and for bad, were the same women who claimed to have her best intentions at heart. Who were any of them to say what Iyo was and wasn't capable of - or who was worthy of her? If Rhea was going to prove herself, it would have to be on her own terms and merit. Fighting beside Iyo wasn't enough. Rhea had to fight for her.

Setting upon Dakota with a rain of open-handed strikes, Rhea was relieved to find the brunette wasn't simply selling. The Eradicator lashed out for another headbutt, coming up empty as Dakota flung herself to the ground, landing a harsh kick to Rhea's mouth in the process. A tangy wave of blood flowed from Rhea's tongue, the rage of the fight once more taking hold of her. The bloody grin she treated Dakota to caused a brief flicker of hesitation - all she needed to drag the smaller woman up into a Prism Trap.

Suspended in the middle of the ring as she was, Dakota had no chance of escape, her very movements laboured with the pain shooting through the Kiwi's knee, down into her core and back. So putting a recently injured woman into a submission exploiting her vulnerabilities wasn't the most honourable move. But her instincts about this match had proved to be correct - and judging by Iyo's stony gaze as the bell rang, they were finally on the same page about that.

As Iyo climbed, Rhea flipped her grasp on Dakota. She slammed the suspended woman's back into the mat again and again, not fully releasing the powerbomb until she was sure that the Kiwi wouldn't be able to kick out whether she wanted to or not. Then, and only then, with Iyo crouched on the ropes overhead did she deliver the full sit-out Riptide, rolling out of the way just as her partner flipped backward.

To her credit, Kairi didn't rush out to try to break the pinfall - watching blankly as the ref counted out their narrow victory. Nineteen minutes felt like one of the greatest marathons Rhea had ever run, and all the blonde could do was jump down off the apron and trudge backstage as though none of it had mattered much to her at all.

Rhea and Iyo were left staring at one another, the myriad of emotions restrained during the course of the match reaching the surface. The goth was certain she was going to burst, all of the stress and pressure of their last week together bubbling in the pit of her stomach finally released. It was all she could do to reach out a hand and help Iyo to her feet, as Dakota rolled out of the ring to be helped away. Their hands lingered clasped, deaf to the world as they stared at each other in disbelief.

Distantly, Rhea realized their joined hands were being lifted by the ref as their victory was announced. All at once, the atmosphere around them caught up to her, a grin splitting her face. Victory.

The moment was short-lived. Once the ref released their hands, Iyo averted her gaze, her hand jerking out of Rhea's grasp. The younger woman's stomach dropped, remembering that for all the relief she felt, her partner must have been dealing with much more complex emotions. She schooled her expression, instead clapping a hand against the Japanese woman's shoulder, guiding her away from the uncomplicated celebration that the ring held into the darkened halls of the arena, where true emotional displays were far more acceptable.

It was then she felt the weight of a body against her, her arms suddenly full as Iyo embraced her. Rhea couldn't help the weak chuckle that escaped her as she returned the hug. Her mind was a whirlwind, brain working overtime to process the night's events and the long path that lay before them. But in that moment, there was only one way to convey all that she truly felt.

"I've got you."

Chapter 3: fallout

Chapter Notes

> happy iyo grand slam and rhea crash out!!
>
> we're soon coming into territory where events and dates of actual matches are being screwed with, though still a while before we fully diverge.

Drained as she was, Iyo barely registered where she was being led. She followed behind Rhea in silence to the venue's loading dock, offering little in conversation as she climbed into the woman's rental car. So much had happened in such a short span of time. Recalling the way that Kairi's face had lost all compassion the second she made her way into the ring caused a shiver to reverberate through Iyo's body.

Rhea unhelpfully jabbed at the seat warmer. She also seemed to be struggling to find what to say. Not that Iyo blamed her. *So your best friend got possessed by a demon, huh?* That wasn't the best icebreaker in the world.

"Are you rooming with them?" the younger woman eventually asked, pulling into the parking lot of an unfamiliar hotel.

Iyo nodded solemnly.

"Okay. Damian's going to swing by your dressing room to grab anything you left at the show. Do you think Dakota would bring the rest of your stuff over?"

That was a better question. Dakota certainly didn't always love Rhea either, having a far more storied personal experience with her than the rest of Damage Ctrl, but she hadn't used their match as any opportunity to even any scores. Far from it. Furthermore, having anyone else invade Kairi's space felt like a recipe for disaster.

"Yes... I should ask, but I left my phone."

"Oh. I'm not sure if I have her number." The younger woman fumbled about tapping in her password without a glance as she pulled into the underground garage. With a frown, she handed the phone off to Iyo.

"I know it." Iyo managed to push on a dim smile. Rhea looked surprised - perhaps an indication of the minor generational difference

between them. While uncommon to have others' numbers memorized, it made Iyo's travels abroad much easier when her friends and family's information was always on the tip of her tongue. Any other time she would tease the younger woman for that trace of naivety, but she prioritized taking the offered cell.

Ignoring the cluttered mess of Rhea's home screen and the oddly predictable wallpaper photo of her dogs, Iyo jabbed at the phone icon before thinking better of it. An unknown number may just go ignored, and for that matter she didn't even know what might be happening on the other end of the line. Instead she swapped over to Rhea's messages and rapidly typed in Dakota's number, confirming she wasn't in the woman's contacts despite their years of working in parallel. She rattled off a quick burst of messages, noting the lack of a Japanese keyboard with mild frustration.

It's Iyo.

Can you bring my bags to Rhea's? 🧳⏩□□♀□

Damian coming by for other things. □□♂□ 📱

No issues ok? 👀□👀□

I love you. □

As Rhea parked, Iyo avoided the temptation to navigate to the woman's language settings. The moderate effort to do so wouldn't make up any time or effort in the end, as she had to imagine she'd have her phone back within the hour. To waylay the urge, she attempted to pass the phone back to Rhea - the younger woman merely waving her off instead as she stepped out of the vehicle. Crawling out of the car to follow, Iyo instead busied herself with a few post-match stretches. At least she felt physically alright.

It wasn't until they were in the elevator that the phone screen lit up with a brief response:

Love you too, will once things have calmed down

Never seen her like this 😖

Mentally? Not so much. But now wasn't the time to let herself fall into turmoil. Schooling her expression, she watched the indicator light in the elevator climb.

The pair ascended to Rhea's floor in silence. Last time Iyo had visited Rhea's room, she had booked a comfortable yet not very lavish suite. Judging by the middle floor selection, that seemed to be a general rule of thumb for the woman's accommodations.

The disarray of the room that greeted Iyo, however, was a fair bit different from the previous week's circumstances. Clearly the extra preparation time before was of benefit to Rhea. Sheets were strewn half across the floor - an impressive display considering Rhea hadn't yet spent a night in the room. A small suitcase upon the bed was propped open, an array of black clothing tossed about as well. Trying to find the right black shirt must have been a daily nightmare that Iyo was grateful to have never encountered before. From what she could see, the bathroom was a similar disaster, makeup tossed about in a frenzy of pre-match jitters.

Rhea stilled self-consciously at the sight of the room as though seeing it for the first time. "I... sorry. I was in a rush this morning." The goth's blush was blatant even through her heavy stage makeup. She quickly sprung into action, folding items back into her suitcase at full tilt. "I don't usually..."

Flattering that Rhea thought Iyo cared in the least. Perhaps she would if Rhea was a habitual slob that Iyo was forced to room with and pick up after for months on end, but acting as though she would be offended when she was the one imposing was ridiculous. The Japanese woman shook her head in disbelief.

"Leave it." Iyo stopped her with an upraised hand. Some days, finding the right words was difficult, and this was proving to be one of those days. A week ago, Rhea had been a perfect host. How on earth could Iyo explain that it was she who should have been sorry? Instead of trying further, she strode into the bathroom and simply set through the motions of unmaking herself in the way she would if this were her own room - unclipping her multicoloured extensions one at a time and laying them on the messy vanity without a care.

The nonchalant energy proved to be at least halfway effective at limiting Rhea's frantic energy. Through the mirror, Iyo watched as the woman slowed and ceased folding, instead bashfully shoving her clothes back into the suitcase. She left out a couple items, leaning on the bulging bag with one arm and zipping it closed with the other, before setting to work on returning the bed itself into a half-assed semblance of order.

Iyo was still watching her in amusement when Rhea glanced up, locking eyes with her in the mirror. The Japanese woman wasn't particularly ashamed about being caught staring, rather it was Rhea who after a couple of seconds dipped her head in embarrassment rather than break the quiet tension. Such a brusque woman could not be that timid outside of the ring, so whatever anxious energy darted between them now had to come down to the circumstances of the match that had brought them there.

Life would be much easier if Rhea would only ask her straightforwardly how she was feeling, or what had happened in the ring.

Instead, Rhea turned and strode into the bathroom with a sigh, and began to remove her own makeup. In the small bathroom, the two were forced to stand nearly shoulder to shoulder, brushing occasionally as they moved about. Iyo marvelled at just how many makeup remover wipes it took to get to the Rhea underneath. The delicate freckles that began to appear were surreal - her entire presence transforming from the imposing Eradicator into a much softer-hearted woman that Iyo was just beginning to discover.

"You mind if I shower first?" Rhea chucked her sixth and final used makeup wipe in the bin - a bit of black still stubbornly sticking around the sides of her mouth. Whoever made her cosmetics really prioritized the long-lasting portion of their formula.

"Go ahead." Iyo waved her on, pausing in the process of removing her earrings. "Do you want me to--," she gestured to the door. While she hadn't finished cleaning up, she wasn't quite sure where Rhea's comfort levels were in regards to her staying in the room while she showered. She had to remind herself that it had been a couple of years since Rhea had really had to deal with sharing her space with another woman, while Iyo had never had the luxury of privacy during all her years in the industry.

"Oh, no drama," the taller woman reassured, though Iyo noted again that she wasn't quite confident enough to meet her gaze. "Do what you gotta."

Iyo nodded and resumed her previous actions, hoping that flicking her gaze down towards the countertop would reduce any feelings of discomfort Rhea might have. As she did, she heard the shower start up, the sound of the shower curtain being drawn not far behind. By the time Iyo had finished washing her own makeup off, the mirror was

beginning to fog. Rhea's boots and other ring gear had been neatly placed next to the shower, a towel draped over the top of the curtain rod at the ready.

"Done, I'll be in the room," Iyo called over the noise of the water, thinking it best to communicate to prevent any further awkwardness.

"I won't be too long," the other woman called back, "There's uh. Games on my phone if there's not anything on TV?"

"Got it." Iyo nodded even though Rhea couldn't see her, exiting the bathroom and closing the door behind her just loudly enough to be obvious.

Once it had been cleaned up somewhat, Rhea's room wasn't at all remarkable. There was a slightly nicer than average view, but aside from that it was a fairly standard business-class room, a single queen-sized bed dominating much of the space. Made up or not, Iyo didn't feel quite right setting herself down on it uninvited, so instead perched on the room's lone loveseat.

Rhea mentioning her phone reminded Iyo that she should be checking it regularly in case she somehow missed any communication from Dakota. For that matter, she took the opportunity to set up the contact properly. A minute later, **King Kota** 💪□□□□💥 had been born. One bit of imposition had a way of leading to another, and soon enough the rest of Damage Ctrl had been appropriately set - as well as Bayley's contact name having been changed to a very mature □ **Sore Loser**‼□.

Out of morbid curiosity, Iyo tapped in her own number, finding that she had been gifted the extremely descriptive name of **weird japanese girl**. Whether or not she was offended would have to come down to just when she had been brandished with that name. Not that Iyo's own contact for Rhea was much better. She had ruminated for some time about the long-standing ☠□ that had been Rhea's only signifier for years, until about a month ago finally tacking a purple heart onto it.

Suddenly, a text appeared across the top of Rhea's phone screen.

terror twin

on the way with some stuff. why do the little ones hit so hard?

Before she could think about whether or not she should have read a text clearly intended for Rhea, Iyo had already responded, maybe less

than eloquently.

Kairi!? 😳

Sorry. 🥺🙇‍♀️

It's Iyo btw. 🤜❤️

Almost immediately she got a response.

oh hey lil homie. i'll fill you guys in when i get there. all under control.

Despite Damian's reassurances, Iyo's brain was still turning at a mile a minute. For all she had tried to keep back her worries since their match's earlier conclusions, the woman was beginning to realize just how seriously Kairi's mood had turned over the past several days. It wasn't as though she couldn't relate. Bayley had turned on all of them for greener pastures and a spotlight on herself alone, and on a surface level it did seem that the same could be said for Iyo now. Whatever trust her best friend had in her had frayed, but she was lost as to how to begin rebuilding something as fragile as a decade-long relationship that had always teetered on the knife's edge between professional and too personal.

Iyo's thoughts returned to the match. Her every muscle was taut, adrenaline surging below the surface as she readied herself for the next bell to ring. The second it had, and Dakota had turned tail to retreat, everything had changed. It would have been easier had Kairi been filled with the same tension - for them to meet in the middle and grapple as they always had. Yet when the bell did finally sound, Kairi had simply fixed her with such a withering stare. Cold and lifeless as if staring right through her. Iyo hadn't been able to stand seeing her best friend look at her like that - retreating into a fragile inner shell as the Pirate Princess approached not as her partner or rival, but as an enemy.

That look had been surreal. For that matter, so was the lack of choice presented in her supposed exit from Damage Ctrl. This was the group that had formed around her, that had fought alongside her, supported her and helped her rise to the top of WWE. Women she had worked alongside for years. While Kairi wasn't who she had known the longest, she was Iyo's closest friend, and the one that she had always felt the deepest connection to. Some of their history was complicated to say the least, but even at their roughest moments they had always regarded each other as their other half, their path through life.

All roads led to Kairi Sane.

She was so lost in thought that she didn't hear Rhea re-enter the room until the taller woman placed a tentative hand on her shoulder. Turning, the Japanese woman saw that Rhea had redressed herself in a form-fitting tank top and sweatpants. Her damp hair had been brushed and tied loosely back, pale skin still flushed from the heat of the shower. As she settled down next to Iyo, her eyes wandered over the exposed tattoos, noticing some for the first time - among them an oddly out of place chicken on the back of her arm. She reached out to touch it curiously.

"It's a memorial," Rhea explained softly at the woman's confusion. "How are you doing?"

Iyo's eyes met hers once more, forcing on a placating smile. She gestured to the phone still in her hand. "Not too good. Damian will be here soon."

Rhea nodded, her expression stony as she read the messages. "Not great, yeah. I'll wait for him if you want a shower, or...?"

"Yes. I'll be quick." Iyo nodded. She briefly hesitated as she stood, recalling her lack of fresh clothing with some awkwardness. The previous week she at least had the chance to get out of her ring gear beforehand, but now here she was having to further impose on the woman. "Do you have --"

"Extra set of clothes on the counter already. I cleaned it up a bit too." The Australian gave a quick grin, her canines flashing as though proud of her forethought. Iyo laughed at her expression, though her worries were only momentarily quelled. She reached forward to give the woman's bicep an appreciative squeeze as she made her way to the bathroom, hoping by the time the steam had finished washing her melancholy away, the world had finally regained some sanity.

Rhea wasn't an expert on close working relationships, but she was pretty sure the best ones didn't involve sitting in silence as one person waited for the other to work through their emotional turmoil in the shower. Not that the Australian could really blame her for struggling with the fallout, but she had to wonder if a potential faction split and loss of a friend was the only true factor in play. The way Iyo and Kairi had looked at one another wasn't simple resentment. During the match, Rhea had thought that their dynamic seemed to mirror her own issues with Liv, but with more time to think of it, wasn't it more

like watching herself beat the crap out of Dom?

Kairi worries I will be lost in you.

You ruin her.

Trying to breach that subject gently seemed like it would be a nightmare, but perhaps hashing things out with Dakota would illuminate some of those particulars. Last thing she wanted was to come off as confrontational or judgey after all that had happened.

A single, loud knock at the door sounded before long. Unconsciously, Rhea flicked the TV on, not paying any heed to what channel it was set to. Just a bit of extra sound to maintain Iyo's privacy - a trick she had employed many times to obscure her own less PG rated activities. When in doubt, blame Game of Thrones.

She gave the peephole a quick peek, confirming Damian was there before throwing open the door. "Hey."

"Yo," the towering man greeted in turn, a small white duffel bag slung over his shoulder. "Here's what was at the gig. Kota's gonna bring the rest tomorrow when they check out, if that works."

Rhea nodded and accepted the bag. "Thanks. Heard it didn't go so smoothly."

Damian just shrugged as he peered past Rhea into the room. "Yeah, well. Wasn't too bad, little lady just didn't want to let me go with Iyo's things. Don't think she meant to get scrappy like that, but her elbows are definitely tougher than my ribs are." He rubbed at the sore spot under his jean jacket pointedly, before curiously gesturing at the tv. "The Price is Right?"

"Just needed some distraction," Rhea explained shortly. It wasn't like Damian wouldn't see through any lie she could cobble together anyway, but he wasn't nosy enough to pry further. "How was Dakota dealing?"

Her Terror Twin shrugged, shoving his hands in his pockets a bit awkwardly. Rhea wasn't about to invite him in while Iyo was in the shower, and for that matter, there was no real need for him to linger much longer. Pure business with a side of troubling affection, as most of her friendships were. "She seemed overwhelmed. Y'know, I think they both expected Iyo would still go back after all that shit but... you seen the promo they cut?"

She shook her head - of course, she remembered hearing that Damage Ctrl were going to be the ones to demand the match on-screen, but had honestly forgotten about it up until then. Perhaps watching it would help to illuminate some of that night's tenser moments. Someone had probably clipped it and thrown it up in their instagram reels already. "Nah, but on the to-do list now."

Damian gave a brusque nod before glancing down the hall. "Well, you know where I'm at if things get hairy."

Rhea chuckled. "If things go that bad again, we oughta just retire." She gave her old friend a good-natured punch in the arm, and stepped aside to swing the door shut. "Thanks again. For real. Take it easy, El Campeon."

"Later," he waved, trudging off down the hall. Rhea watched him go before closing the door, locking the bolt and deadbolt with some relief. She was so done with people today, even the people she liked - though there was still some shit left to shovel, so to speak.

Iyo hadn't emerged from the bathroom yet, but Rhea wasn't in a rush. Instead, she reclined on her bed and set to work tracking down Damage Ctrl's promo from that night. Thankfully, it didn't take too long to locate.

Its filming was rushed to the experienced eye, clearly a last-minute plan to cover all their asses.

Jackie Redmond approached the pair as they paced worriedly up and down the back halls of the arena. As she neared, the camera caught the sound of the two arguing. Kairi barked out rapidly in Japanese, too quick for Rhea's extremely limited grasp of the language. Her face, however, was intense in its worry - a far cry from her hollow, brutal expression in the ring.

"Don't worry, Iyo knows what she's doing," Dakota reassured, taking hold of Kairi's shoulder. As she noticed Jackie's approach, her frown deepened.

"Ladies, good evening. I'm sorry if I've caught you at a bad time - everyone has been curious about last week's events. Can you tell me if there's any truth to Iyo's apparent partnership with Rhea Ripley?" the interviewer broached, her tone gentle and non-confrontational even as Kairi hissed something uncouth in Japanese her way.

The Kiwi was more generous, at least. "We can't say, honestly. We support Iyo going after the championship, of course, but..." She shook her head, glancing over at the restless Kairi, her worry quickly becoming untenable.

"We're still a united front, but this is a case of the enemy of your enemy is your friend for her. We're just... not sure if we agree about being able to trust Rhea long-term."

"Rhea will turn on her the second things go wrong!" Kairi snarled in agreement, her English strained and rapid-fire. Despite the woman's small size, she made an intimidating figure - her distress on clear display.

Jackie reeled, taking a step back from the women. The pause that followed was uncomfortably long. When she continued, it was less interrogative and more placating. "While there's been conflict with Rhea in the past," she agreed, "we haven't seen any major indications recently to prove hostility towards Iyo. Far from it, it seems."

Dakota opened her mouth to respond, when a thought visibly flashed over Kairi's face. The Japanese woman closed the distance between herself and Jackie once more, clutching the interviewer's shoulders. The prior distress melted away, only to be replaced by a savage glee. "Yes," she whispered madly, "we have to prove it."

Dakota's brows furrowed in concern as Jackie's mouth dropped open in surprise. "That wasn't quite what I…," she began, when suddenly Kairi released her grip on the interviewer and rushed off-camera.

Dakota's brows furrowed in concern as Jackie turned to her for comment. "I'm sorry, I've got to handle this." She excused herself, rushing after her partner and leaving the mystified interviewer behind.

The clip came to an end with the uncharacteristically loud cry of Kairi demanding to know, "Where is Pearce!?"

Rhea sat in a stunned silence. What the fuck was that? She couldn't help but feel the promo was just as much a message to her as it was to Iyo. A threat, perhaps. But at the same time, there was a hint of desperation. Kairi's intentions were suddenly clear - she entirely doubted Rhea's capacity to protect Iyo, and had resorted to trying to hurt her to prevent anyone else from doing the same. By defeating Kairi at the absolute height of her capabilities, had she managed to prove her trustworthiness, at the expense of Kairi's own? It was insane, but the truth was now clear. Kairi would rather test their limits now than wait to see the day that Rhea would break.

Had that attempted wake-up call worked? For Rhea, it had.

Rhea's thoughts were interrupted by the bathroom door creaking open. Iyo had dressed in some of the clothes Rhea had left out for her,

the borrowed shirt hanging loosely off her smaller frame, coming nearly to her knees. She had apparently foregone the too-large sweats in favour of going bare-legged. Combined with her damp hair hanging long down her back, the look was stupidly adorable - managing to distract Rhea from all the stress for a few precious moments.

Iyo herself also seemed to be a fair bit more at ease. Whether that was from the shower itself or the time alone to think, Rhea wasn't sure, but was grateful all the same. She patted the bed next to her, the older woman coming to sit next to the Australian. She grabbed her bag curiously, taking a quick inventory of its contents.

"Damian dropped it off," Rhea clarified, quickly filling her partner in on what Damian had told her, then handing over her phone so Iyo could watch the promo as well, once confirming that her partner had been left equally in the dark. Her hair hung darkly around her eyes, obscuring the finer points of her expression. Nonetheless, she appeared calm enough. By the time Iyo handed Rhea's phone back, curiosity had overwhelmed the Australian. “There’s something you haven’t told me, isn’t there?”

To that, Iyo merely grabbed her bag and pushed herself to the edge of the bed, staring down at the floor as she responded, “Yes. I promise it’s nothing you need to worry about." She stood, the exhaustion plain in her every movement. “Thank you for everything, Rhea.”

While the aches and pains were also beginning to set in for the Australian, she rushed forward quickly, grasping Iyo’s wrist. Asking so bluntly was a risky move, one she hoped hadn’t offended the other woman too badly. “Woah there. Where you headed?”

Iyo half-turned, her expression carefully guarded. “I need to get a room?”

If not for the questioning lilt, Rhea might have thought she really screwed up. Unbelievable if Iyo thought after all that, she wouldn’t let her crash. Albeit the last time around, Iyo had ended up staying to such an early hour that by the time sleep was a factor, it was already time to pack up and check out. But surely it was obvious that the entire point of bringing Iyo there had been so she could share Rhea’s room? She supposed she had never really asked that explicitly.

“I thought you’d just stay here, if that’s fine with you,” Rhea said, gesturing around. The room was smaller than the last, lacking a pull-out couch, which perhaps could cause misunderstanding. “If you’re

not cool with sharing the bed, I'll take the loveseat. Don't sweat it."

The Japanese woman gave her a quizzical look. "Oh. That's ok. Sharing's ok."

The pair lapsed into a bit of an awkward silence as they came to an agreement. Rhea never had been the best host - her instincts surging towards the one thing she did know to be universal. Food. "I'll order room service again, you make yourself at home." She set about dialing down to the kitchen, rattling off an order before she could think much about it. Last time, Iyo hadn't minded Rhea doing so - but she wasn't sure whether that was down to the circumstances or not.

There was a lot to learn about her partner both in and out of the ring, Rhea realized. What time did she prefer to sleep on match nights? Did that differ otherwise? What time did she get up? Would Rhea rising early to hit the gym wake Iyo? What were Iyo's living arrangements like when not on tour? Did she room with Kairi and Dakota year-round? Rhea had a spare room at her place, but was that weird to offer suddenly? Would Iyo want to share rooms while on the road, or would tonight be a one-off?

Rhea was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she didn't realize she was still holding the room's phone on a dead line until Iyo was standing before her, a confused smile spreading across her face. The normally shorter woman was taller than Rhea was while sitting, a strange feeling that caused a slight spike of panic to surge through her - a bit like the moment before watching Iyo hurtle off the ropes towards her.

Iyo's hand folding itself through Rhea's hair was familiar in a far less threatening way. "You okay?"

She was, she realized, embarrassed for the first time in a long time. The Eradicator didn't get bashful, but Rhea, on the hand, certainly could. A flush crept up her neck as she tried to formulate a response. Instead, she hung the phone up with a clatter, managing a weak, "Yeah," and a nervous chuckle. "Maybe a bit tired." It was a good thing Iyo didn't seem to mind her lack of communication skills - her hand brushing back Rhea's hair a second time before retreating.

"You can nap, I'll wake you to eat," Iyo offered. Rhea noticed that while she was on the phone, her partner had wasted no time moving some pieces of furniture to the side to lay down a thin yoga mat. "I'm going to do my cool down exercises."

Rhea nodded dumbly. "Yeah, okay." She doubted she would really be able to rest, no matter how exhausted she felt, but obliged just to have an excuse to do anything else except stare at Iyo stretching. The Australian shook her head, trying to clear the fuzz from her thoughts. The confidence was leaking out of her ears - unsure of how to process Iyo's very presence. She was acting like a damn fool.

She laid on her side, facing away from her partner. The room was a bit too bright to comfortably close her eyes, but Rhea did her best to shut out the rest of the world. She focused on counting out her breaths, and the soft sounds of Iyo's movements. Her mind warred with itself, unable to keep herself from wondering just what it was that Iyo was keeping from her, and what else she simply just didn't know about the woman. Nothing to worry about, perhaps, but what if Rhea wanted to know?

It was all a bit too much, the troubled thoughts swirling around in Rhea's head as she tried her best to ignore just how far Iyo had already wormed into her life.

By the time Rhea awoke, she was surprised to see the beginnings of light streaming through the hotel window. Iyo was perched on the loveseat, a steaming cup of tea in hand. Disoriented, Rhea turned over to take in the clock reading 6:53AM. The bed beside her was unmade. She didn't know when, or how, she had managed to pass out, but judging by the gnawing in her gut, it was before she had eaten - and she had stayed out.

A yawn exited Rhea before she could help herself, drawing Iyo's attention.

"Morning," she greeted. "Sorry, tried waking you... deep sleeper?"

She must be, not that anyone had really had to wake her up for ages. Dom slept til noon habitually - actually, Rhea had been the only morning person amongst the Judgment Day. Though 'morning person' was still a stretch. Rhea certainly didn't wake up for the hell of it to see the sunrise, unlike her partner. One question down, an infinite number to go.

So, she shrugged.

"Food’s in the fridge. I made you coffee." Iyo pointed to the pot, still steaming away. "I hope it's ok

The coffee was more than ok - it was exactly what Rhea needed. She took to her feet, stumbling over to her bag to fish out one of her travel mugs. A short while later, she was helping herself to a long swig of deliciously black coffee, feeling the warmth spread through her. Before long, she was scarfing down lukewarm mashed potatoes and Salisbury steak, courtesy of the hotel room's shoddy microwave. By the time she had finished, she felt like a new woman - albeit one with a stiff back.

"You're the best," Rhea said as way of thanks, settling down next to Iyo to watch the final bits of colour drain from the sky to be replaced by hazy blue.

"You're better," Iyo joked back. "Free food, a bed, bodyguard? I'm spoiled."

The younger woman shoved her shoulder lightly into Iyo's. "What are partners for? I'm gonna hit the gym soon, you wanna come or you gonna wait here for Dakota?" Rhea had no idea when the other woman was planning on coming by, but it seemed likely that she wouldn't make the trip too early in the day.

"Actually, I have to go to the airport soon," Iyo corrected after a moment’s hesitation. Realization dawned over Rhea slowly, counting the days mentally in her head. They had been so busy that she scarcely remembered that the holiday season was looming over them. Rhea had been scheduled for the holiday tour weeks ago, but she hadn't even thought about Iyo's own schedule.

It was obvious now that Iyo had plans to return to Japan. If Rhea had bothered talking to her partner properly throughout the week, this wouldn't have caught her so off guard. "How long are you going home for?" she asked, trying to keep the concern out of her voice. She had no right to care what Iyo did during her time off, but she would be lying if she said she wasn't worried about whatever new chemistry they had managed to cobble together in the ring being reset back to square one.

"Until the new year," Iyo confirmed. "I'm meeting Dakota on the way." She sounded apologetic, which was ridiculous. Rhea hadn't earned that from her yet. "I'll let you know when I land. You can text me with news?"

Rhea nodded, not quite trusting herself to speak. It wasn't like she had ever been glued to the hip with Iyo. They had even been separated for

a year between their respective RAW debuts. Though she had been oddly choked up back then about that, she didn't think the prospect of a couple weeks apart now would feel so brutal - but here she was, sullen as could be. Her thoughts must have shown on her face, because suddenly Iyo's hand was back in her hair. This time, Rhea didn't shy away from the contact, instead mirroring it, messing up the older woman's neatly brushed hair. "You can too, bozo."

Iyo's expression was unreadable, but her fingers kept combing through Rhea's hair. "I will."

Rhea's mind flashed back to Kairi, remembering the cold way she had walked away from their match the previous night. Whether for show, or to prove a point, the thought of the other woman reuniting with Iyo without Rhea there set an uncomfortable chill through her. "You gonna be able to handle Kairi?"

Iyo's fingers stopped, before retracting completely. "She's not going home?" The Australian blinked blankly. Her confusion must have been all too obvious, as the Japanese woman chuckled wryly. "She has the Intercontinental Championship... you don't pay attention to others' matches, do you?"

The Australian felt a bit sheepish. "Not often." For so long, she had been a main roster champion. It had been ages since she had to pay close attention to the mid-card's upcoming matches, watching only particular threats as they presented themselves. Maybe another reason why Liv had fucked everything up for her so easily. New year's resolution: be less self-absorbed.

The older woman only tutted playfully. She stood and stretched, Rhea's borrowed shirt hiking up a few inches as she did. "Time to take notes," Iyo teased. "We're a tag-team now."

That was true, Rhea supposed. She was still mostly a rookie in the tag-team world, and on top of that had doubled the number of potential challengers to be fielded at one time. The more she knew about her opponents, the easier her job would be. "Fine, fine." She sighed, moving over to her suitcase to distract herself with locating her earbuds. "I'll hear from you as soon as you land. Deal?"

"Deal," Iyo agreed.

Being partnerless had never felt so strange.

Chapter 4: distance

Chapter Notes

happy evolution!

so much has happened in life and across the card since last time. a part of me is still flabbergasted we actually got a rhiyo tag team? anyway, i miss a lot of these ladies. they all deserve better than what they get, so remember to support them in their endeavours. and a speedy recovery to zoey and liv.

enjoy!

Trying not to check her phone compulsively proved to be an exercise in futility - barely an hour could pass before Rhea was back staring at her texts to Iyo.

weird japanese girl!?

I landed safely.

Hell yeah!

Rest up, you've earned it

Tried out that whole yoga thing today... my joints aren't happy How tf do you manage

That had been Tuesday night, and Rhea hadn't heard a single word from Iyo since. Obsessive was the only way to describe the Australian, her mood growing fouler by the minute. She tried to keep herself busy, throwing herself into the holiday shows with as much energy as she could muster, and filling every other waking moment with both physical and mental training. The looming Intercontinental Championship at least provided plenty of study material for Rhea - taking specific mental notes of the differences in how the more prolific tag team wrestlers moved when solo versus in team matches. She even volunteered herself for a three-person tag team match during the holiday tour with Naomi and Bianca for the hell of it - figuring at worst she'd be able to see how consistent her bad habits were without making Iyo look worse.

But Thursday afternoon crept by, and temptation began to rumble unsubtly in the back of Rhea's mind. Sending another text would seem

pushy. While Iyo had seemed fine on Tuesday morning, a growing part of Rhea wondered if she had second thoughts about their partnership that distance had worsened - or, perhaps, Rhea's slight momentary over-enthusiasm had come off as unserious and offended the still troubled Japanese wrestler.

There were a million possibilities, and Rhea had exactly no one to ask for a second opinion from. In the past, her phone had been a distraction from the monotony of tour, not a lifeline to human connection. But now, she had nothing. Her former friends had fallen by the wayside, and she hadn't exactly been making new ones. Those that remained were on slightly awkward professional terms only, or were not insignificantly older men with storied histories who would certainly find her mundane insecurities pitiful at best. Not how she would ever willingly present herself.

So between watching practice matches between NXT talents at the training center, Rhea shifted between checking her texts to ensure she hadn't somehow missed a message, and checking Iyo's social media as well to see if perhaps the older woman was just avoiding Rhea in particular.

How the mighty had fallen to such pathetic teenagerish lows. Exactly what the fuck was wrong with her?

She tore herself away from doomscrolling for long enough to catch the end of one of Lyra's matches. The up-and-comer had been running matches all day against a somewhat creepy-looking goth from the NXT roster that Rhea couldn't recall the name of. Not that she was bad at names, she just... hadn't really been checking up on her old stomping grounds.

Be less self-absorbed.

Reminding herself of that one when the back of her brain was still itching to necro her texts to Iyo was difficult, to say the least.

Thankfully, two familiar entrants into the training center were enough to snap Rhea out of her stupor. Dakota strode in fully geared up, Kairi acting as her shadow while dissimilarly clad in typical athleisure. By the looks of it, the Japanese woman had already been hard at work, while the Kiwi was freshly warmed up.

Despite their very recent bout, autopilot and that insane nagging curiosity took over all else. "Yo," Rhea called, raising a hand in greeting to the pair.

"Hey," Dakota responded in kind after half a beat, her eyes scanning the room and sending a wave Lyra and the mystery NXT girl's way. Kairi, on the other hand, spared no acknowledgement, simply striding up to the pair to relieve them of their practice ring in short order.

The brunette hovered around Rhea's position at the bench instead, curiosity plain on her face. "IC prep is going crazy right now... What are you doing here?"

Rhea shrugged, struggling to figure out a way to explain herself simply. She settled on the truth Dakota already knew. "Watching people who are better than me in things, so I can figure out why I suck." The Australian gestured vaguely towards the ring.

Kairi glanced their way from the ring, looking at Rhea with a grim expression that she couldn't quite place. The Pirate Princess had always been hard to read, though that seemed to have become even more extreme in the past couple weeks. A wild card, though never too hostile even at Damage Ctrl's worst - if you stayed out of her way, she would stay out of yours. Considering the self-centred nature of the Eradicator's work, they were just ships in the night who never posed a threat to one another.

In fact, having Damage Ctrl keep half the card's threats in line had been a welcome presence - their coincidental tandem shift towards not beating the crap out of everyone unprovoked had also kept heat off of Rhea when she got ousted from the Judgment Day. Fact was, they weren't friends whatsoever. But just like Iyo, they were not-quite rivals. Collaborating by chance, if ever, but never in one another's way.

That was, until now, through no reason beyond Rhea just not thinking her moves through. None of them seemed particularly keen about the situation either.

Dakota nodded, still seeming curious. "Well, feel free to watch us too, I guess. Not that you weren't able to handle us already…" she trailed off, the implication of Rhea refusing to take an ingenuine win heavy in the air between them.

The Australian could detect some apprehension in her expression - clearly she wasn't sure how much Rhea had told Iyo about the offer to eat a pin. Just as Rhea was unsure of how much Dakota knew about the inexplicable tension between Iyo and Kairi.

"She doesn't know," Rhea clarified, taking the opportunity to voice her

own curiosities, "We didn't really have much time to go over everything before she went home anyway. Haven't heard from her since she landed actually, have you?"

Dakota cocked her head in mild surprise. "No, actually."

Hearing that from the woman's former tag partner was simultaneously reassuring and worrying in a whole new fashion. Rhea tried not to let her anxiety show on her face. "Oh," she managed, her tone flat.

"I'm sure she's just busy. It's almost the new year, and she hasn't been back since the summer. I can text her if you need me to check?" Dakota placated. Great, so Rhea had come off as desperate and worried as she was trying not to. Never mind that the offer seemed in good faith.

"Maybe.., well I gotta jet." The Australian fumbled an excuse together, trying to brush over the evident lack of schedules she had to keep to. Blindly grabbing for her bag, she found Dakota stepping in between her and the exit suddenly with a rather clunky movement.

"Hey. It's gonna be chill alright? Things are off, you're not wrong." The Kiwi glanced over her shoulder at Kairi, who was impatiently draped over the top rope, watching them as uncannily as a cat. When she spoke again, it was hushed, her accent more pronounced than usual. "Some things just aren't mine to spill, you get me? I shouldn't even really know, but... you start to pick up on it in enough time. Don't freak. But you've got my girl's back, so I have yours."

The Australian felt a bit of the weight lift from her shoulders - though not enough to feel entirely at ease. Even with the events of their match earlier in the week, she had trouble trusting in Dakota's good intentions. While they had steered clear of one another since being brought up to the main roster, it was certainly hard to forget the more distant past. So it went with everyone, eventually - little wonder why Rhea kept so few friends. Perhaps it was time to rebuild at least one bridge. Nodding stiffly, she clapped Dakota on the back and gestured off to the ring. "We'll see you later. Go kill it."

The Kiwi smiled, breaking away to join a visibly irritated Kairi. A few short words were exchanged between them, Dakota taking a moment to stretch before their match came underway. Rhea watched them a moment, eyes riveted to the placement of their feet as they circled one another- in conflict, but with the light, relaxed grace of knowing they had an ally in arm's reach- even when that ally was also, for the

moment, a foe.

Rhea took her leave, the itch in the back of her mind to check her phone again not quite satisfied as she trudged down the hall, thumbing through her contact lists again, as though someone she could plausibly vent to would magically appear. Lost in thought, her shoulder collided with another person as she rounded the corner to the building's lobby - the collision nearly hard enough to unsteady her. A muffled groan echoed from the other person, followed quickly by a bark from one of their companions.

"Hey, watch it will ya?" Zoey Stark was as graceless and defensive a person as could exist, immediately stepping up to shove the Australian back a step from a mildly annoyed looking Shayna Baszler. Rhea felt her metaphorical hackles rise, irritated at having been caught so visibly distracted that a woman she had beaten into submission little more than a year ago felt entitled to challenge her over something as mundane as an accidental nudge.

Shayna, thankfully, remained quiet - a bit annoyed, clearly, but it seemed she had the sense to avoid an unneeded fight. Behind the both of them, Sonya stepped up to intervene, expression grim at the commotion raised.

"Ignore her," Sonya hissed, physically pulling Zoey back with reproach. "We have matters to attend to."

Zoey glared daggers at Rhea, but backed down, her eyes not leaving the Australian. "Fucking moron," she grumbled, stalking past Rhea towards the training hall without further delay. The leader of the Pure Fusion Collective forced on an utterly fake smile, moving to follow. She stilled when Shayna stayed rooted to the spot, fixing Rhea with a quizzical look.

"You training with Iyo again?" she asked, her tone giving no hint of the reason for the question. The fighter's expression was as dangerously blank as always, her shoulders tensed, but hands tucked into her sweatpants casually as though she weren't ready to throw down at a moment's notice.

Rhea kept her silence for a few awkward, tense seconds, trying to figure out the woman's angle. What did it matter who she was training with, if anyone? Perhaps she and Zoey were eyeing a run at the tag titles in the near future and were trying to evaluate the current scene - not that herself and Iyo were any real threats as things stood.

After thinking over whether it would look worse to just avoid answering altogether, the Australian shook her head. "She's in Japan." She remained wary of giving out much more information in the wake of the last week's events, but Iyo's whereabouts were sure to be common knowledge sooner rather than later.

The answer seemed to satisfy whatever the Submission Magician wanted out of her, Shanya shrugging her shoulders stiffly. "Roger. Good luck with all that." She tilted her head back towards Sonya, the pair sharing a rather suspicious look as they turned to go. Rhea watched them disappear around the corner, before finally letting out a breath.

Trudging back in the direction of the exit, she ruminated over the interaction. It was hard to tell what PFC were on about at the best of times - Zoey and Shayna's frenetic destructive energy having been a serious thorn in Rhea's side in the past. Ever since being reeled in by Sonya Deville, she had at least had a break from the troubles they posed. But if Iyo was in their sights, the Australian supposed so was she now. As if worrying about the Judgment Day wasn't enough cause for concern - now she could add PFC to the list of those to worry about jumping her. Maybe that, at least, would soften Kairi's perception of her - the enemy of your enemy was your friend, right?

Rhea stopped dead in her tracks.

Hadn't Dakota eliminated Shayna in the first round of the IC tournament? And wasn't she slated to compete against Zoey in the coming show?

Suddenly, Shayna determining whether Iyo was in the building made a hell of a lot more sense. The Australian spun on her heel, dropping her bag to the ground carelessly as she ran full tilt back towards the practice hall. If instincts were wrong, she would look even more like an unhinged bozo - but she knew she wasn't even before she burst back through the gym doors to the sight of her precise fears.

The members of PFC had wasted no time ascending to the ring once verifying the hall was clear of all other occupants. Kairi was sandwiched to one side of the ring, limbs tangled in the ropes and face pressed to the turnbuckle by Shayna’s full body weight leaning against her back. Meanwhile, Dakota was splayed in the middle of the ring, Sonya restraining her head and arms. Zoey was settled on top of the Kiwi, already having isolated the woman's braced knee.

Sonya looked up as Rhea rushed in, eyes flashing in recognition of the changing tide. Too little, too late. The Eradicator didn't often come into full force outside a regular workday, but damn if she didn't have a surplus of frustration to vent. Crossing the gym in a few desperate strides, Rhea slid under the bottom rope just as Sonya opened her mouth to bark an alert to the others. She got no further than a panicked garble of noise before the Australian's boot met her mouth, sending her sprawling to the mat. Under normal circumstances, she would've at least evaluated if the woman were out cold, but hearing Dakota's cries of pain as Zoey set to work hyper-extending her injured leg evaporated what was left of her good graces. She was on Zoey in seconds, her body colliding with the other woman's with such momentum that they rolled halfway across the ring.

Crawling atop her, Rhea had no hesitation as she sent her fist flying towards Zoey's face, trying to connect wherever she could manage as the woman shielded herself with her arms. She continued to hammer down with lazer-like focus until Dakota wobbled into her line of sight, limping lightly in the direction of Kairi - who, Rhea realized, had her arm twisted painfully behind her back by Shayna, the smaller woman's wrist held menacingly by the martial artist.

"Let her fucking go, Shayna!" Dakota cried out desperately.

The Eradicator slowed to a halt, arm still pressed painfully against Zoey's windpipe but fist held aloft in the air.

"How about you get your attack dog off Zoey before she does any more damage?" Shayna punctuated her demand with a jerk of her chin towards Sonya, who was just beginning to stir. A gnarly flood of blood coated the leader's lower face - Rhea hadn't intended on kicking her quite that hard. Couldn't feel too badly about it, though, when the troupe of Americans had come out guns blazing as they had. Their mission to put Dakota out of commission for the foreseeable future had been all too clear, and they would certainly take Kairi as a consolation prize if they could.

As dangerous as Shayna was also, to call a spade a spade, a sore fucking loser. Surrendering could put Kairi in just as dangerous a situation however, without any leverage to fight back with. The time had come to call some bluffs. "Sure sound like a choosing beggar to me. You started this fuckin' fight, walk away and maybe Zoey leaves with her face intact," Rhea barked out, flexing her fist and reeling back for another hit.

"Wrong choice," Shayna spat, wrenching Kairi's wrist back with a sickening crack. She dropped the smaller woman to the mat without ceremony, racing towards Rhea a moment later. Surprisingly, it was Dakota who stopped her in her tracks, darting into Shayna's way with a Kaio Kick that took the both of them to the mat, the Kiwi's weight collapsing onto her weakened knee. The pair tussled on the floor, Shayna's arms wrapping around Dakota in a weak attempt to wrestle her into a Kirifuda Clutch. The Kiwi rolled forward below the ropes, clearing the larger woman before she could make any true headway - quickly dragging Kairi out of the ring behind her to relative safety.

"What's the matter with you?!" Dakota's cries faded into the background along with Kairi's pained cries, Rhea's pulse pounding through her ears as she took stock of the new situation. Alone in a ring with three violent, angry women, the Eradicator's instincts stirred once more. Below her, Zoey loosened her defenses - the wrong choice, as Rhea took the opportunity to hit home with a clean strike to the temple, taking the woman out for the foreseeable future.

Two violent, angry women now. Sonya was struggling to her feet on Rhea's left, Shayna following suit on her right.

"We're leaving," the leader garbled out around a mouthful of blood, rivulets dripping down her neck disgustingly. "We have no qualms with you."

Just bloody rich. Rhea couldn't help the laugh that barked out of her as she rose, treating the unconscious Zoey to a farewell kick to the stomach. "Sure do now. Have fun on Monday, ya bloody cunts." She fixed Shayna with a cold glare, the pair circling around one another until they were aligned with their respective allies.

Carefully, the martial artist stooped to hoist Zoey up and over her shoulder, Sonya covering their retreat with all the menace she could muster. If Rhea truly wanted, she could cross the ring in a fraction of a second and be back upon the only true threat remaining in one of the rare moments of weakness she would ever expose. But the itch in her brain was back, a nagging guilt that could only say, *haven't you already done enough?*

So instead, she let PFC go, making sure they had definitively left before slipping out of the ring herself. She slipped to the ground next to where Dakota sat holding Kairi's arm gingerly. The woman's face was tear-soaked and red with pain, babbling out a rapid burst of Japanese that Rhea couldn't hope to understand beyond the very

frequent curses - some of which were surely directed Rhea's way.

Gambling had never been one of her strong suits, after all.

"She's gonna bloody kill me, isn't she?" the Australian groaned, leaning her flushed forehead against the comparatively cool bar-top. Another empty beer glass laid before Rhea, glinting wickedly at her. By its side, the slumbering screen of her phone taunted her. By no means a lightweight under normal circumstances, Rhea was already a few too deep, and by no means slowing down anytime soon. Not until she could bear the thought of unlocking her phone without her stomach tying itself into frustrated knots. Her hands itched to punch something - but instead she raised a weary hand at the bartender, signalling for a refill.

Even when typing out the update to Iyo, she had been overcome with anxiety, rushing through a flurry of texts. Fearful that any moment the Japanese woman might choose that very moment to check her phone.

I fucked up

Shayna attacked Kairi

Sprained her wrist

Still not sure how bad

Tried to help but made it worse

Kota got jumped too but is ok

She had typed and deleted the word ‘sorry’ about half a dozen times before leaving it unsent. It felt pathetic, grovelling, and disingenuous - not that she wasn’t, but saying it like that, nonchalantly over text like getting one of Iyo’s dearest friends hurt was light drama felt wrong. Not saying anything felt similarly awful. So Rhea was doomed to just feel like shit no matter what.

Beside her, Dakota picked at a rapidly cooling plate of limp, blonde, and lacklustre fries. The Kiwi patted her younger companion's shoulder in meagre reassurance. "Nah. If you were anyone else, probs, but Iyo always goes soft on you." With a sigh, she pushed the plate of fries away and nodded her thanks at the bartender for refilling their drinks. "Not your fault they're a bunch of sadistic jerks, would’ve been worse without you there."

Rhea could only grumble out a vague complaint. They'd been at this already for what felt like hours, having nothing left to do except go cope with the fallout the easiest way they could after the Performance Centre's medical staff had spirited Kairi away to get fully checked out. Thankfully, Dakota's knee had seemed to escape the worst of things - a bit of soreness that would hopefully abate in time for her match on Monday. On the other hand, the degree of damage to Kairi's wrist was hard to immediately pinpoint, and her ability to participate was up in the air depending on the severity of the injury.

Of course, Dakota had tried calling Iyo right away, which went straight to voicemail. At that time it happened to be the dead of the night in Japan, but the more the hours trickled by, the worse Rhea felt about the entire ordeal. Waking to such grim news would be awful, but delaying telling Iyo would be far worse.

"Were we that awful when it was us running people down?" the goth mused into the void moodily.

Dakota snorted in wry amusement. "Probs, but at least it wasn't personal." She fiddled with a spare coaster, spinning it on its side gracefully across the bar. It came to a stop right before Rhea, who rolled her eyes and flicked it back in her companion's direction like a paper football.

"What's their issue with you?" Out of the loop as always, but for once, Rhea wasn't sure if that was due to her inattention or if she simply wasn't privy to whatever issues had the two groups at each other's throats regularly.

With a shrug, the Kiwi kept her silence for some time. Not wanting to press a delicate dynamic any further, Rhea went back to resting her face against the bar. If it wasn't for the tips they kept dropping, she was sure they would've been cut off already. Dakota at least was drinking with some grace, keeping a slow but steady pace - Rhea, on the other hand, kept diving into her beer like a woman who had stumbled out of a desert.

The older woman was about halfway through her glass when she finally spoke, the drawl in her voice making her lack of sobriety clear. "Shit’s complicated," she finally elaborated. "Y’know Zoey and Iyo teamed for a bit, yea?"

Of course. Never missed one of Iyo's matches, even during the times they were stuck on different brands. Despite neglecting the rest of the

world, she made exceptions when it suited her. Realizing that might come off as a little weird considering the aloof impression Rhea made on others, she instead kept to a vague nod.

"Right," the Kiwi continued, "don't think Zoey ever really got over Iyo treating her like she did. Kiddo was dealing with some stuff, and saw Zoey as an opportunist. I can get it from both sides, but they've not been on great terms since then. Small worries though." The older woman cracked her knuckles, avoiding looking up at Rhea in favour of boring a hole in the side of her drink. This was going somewhere. Surely it was, but she was circling around it as much as she possibly could.

Did she think Rhea would judge her for whatever bits of drama had blown up into that day's conflict? Hell, she was already involved in it, knowing the context wouldn't matter in the slightest. The Australian nudged Dakota gently. "Dude, I've been chasing around my crazy ex-tag partner and ex-...manchild for the past half a year. It's Looney Tunes out here. It's chill."

Sighing again, Dakota took a quick sip from her beer before blazing on, momentarily reassured. "Shayna and I used to have a thing." She paused, seemingly waiting for some sort of reaction, but Rhea gave none except a slow, drunken blink. Was that all? She had never been one to care for other people's personal lives, but while initially surprising, she could certainly see it. Dakota had a charming, girl-next-door warmth to her that paired well in retrospect with Shayna's tough external attitude. Nevermind that they were both closet nerds. But she could also see the clear ego clash. Two stubborn assholes.

That wasn’t the thing to say to a new potential friend, though.

"I dated Dom," Rhea said instead, as if that was all the reassurance anyone would ever need. If anyone was to be judged on their ill-advised choices, it was her.

Dakota smirked at that. "Truly tragic. Anyways, it was messy, we were always competing, and then one day we just... stopped getting back together." She sighed, polishing her drink off. "She won't exactly go after me directly. I just can't believe she’d target my girls to get to me.”

She sounded genuinely distraught, and Rhea couldn't help but reach out in comfort, grasping the smaller woman's blissfully cool hand in her own. The Australian recalled the way Shayna had tried to grab at

Dakota earlier on - for such a savage fighter, it had come off as utterly messy. An unwillingness to hurt an old flame did make some sense, even though she was clearly alright with Zoey and Sonya doing the dirty work for her. "They're bloody psycho, and they'll get theirs," she promised, though she wasn't sure if she could really deliver on that, with so much else on her plate.

Lulling into a comfortable silence, Dakota's words reverberated in Rhea. Hadn't Liv's eagerness at the chance to tussle with Iyo in the lead up to War Games left her feeling much the same disbelief? Sure, they were all competitors striving towards the same goals, but that had and always would be the case. So why wait until someone else stepped into the picture to strike, as relatively uninvolved as they were in the grand scheme of things? From where Rhea was sitting, Liv and Shayna operated the same way - predators waiting to ambush someone that didn't watch their back, all to get even with the person they really had a problem with.

You ruin her.

They weren't the only ones. "Are you really not gonna tell me what Kairi's problem with me is?" Rhea blurted unthinkingly.

The Kiwi blinked slowly. The alcohol finally seemed to be setting its claws into them both - bringing out Rhea's bluster, and sapping much of the remaining energy from Dakota. Or perhaps it was simply the day's events catching up to her.

"I've only got guesses," she muttered, as though afraid of being overheard by an unseen gossip, "They're Salt and Pepper, yknow? A set, sometimes on their own but… when they're separated it's just… different." Dakota explained lamely. She grabbed at their empty beer glasses, clinking them together before moving them apart as though to demonstrate the mundanity of the split.

That really didn't help any. Or perhaps Rhea's brain was just toast. "Iyo hasn't gone anywhere," she protested. The way everyone kept talking about their new partnership made things sound so dire - an all or nothing situation that simply wasn't true. Loyalty to Damage Ctrl wouldn't interfere with whatever arrangement she and Iyo had cobbled together. Even if it could, they had no true goals or plans as things stood. "This fucked up their tag team title run, and I didn't mean for that to happen, but there's no reason we can't be on the same team here."

The older woman shook her head, "Right, but she's never had to deal with rejection like that." Dakota struggled to find the words, clearly caught between loyalty to her faction, and the circumstances at play. "Kairi's always been one step ahead of Iyo, and now she's kinda left at the altar, y'know?"

Rhea tilted her head, trying to wrap her brain around that statement. These metaphors weren't working for her. If anything, Iyo seemed to be the more domineering force in the group - the longest career, most titles won, as popular as anyone could hope for with the crowd, the one who snapped the whip when times were tough and expected the others to follow. Not one to follow obediently behind another.

Yet, when she considered the statement, it was true that it was Kairi who was WWE-bound a year before Iyo had finally settled her contract. Kairi who disbanded the Sky Pirates for the first time to join the main roster. And it was Kairi who left WWE to return to Japan, leaving behind Iyo, who was already struggling to adjust to a new country in the midst of the pandemic. They had shared the spotlight for over a decade - why was Iyo acting in her own interest before considering Kairi such a sore spot now? While surreal to the Australian, it was as likely an explanation as anything. Yet some aspect of the picture still seemed up in the air - if that was truly all, why did Iyo seem so devastated to have to compete against Kairi again?

Instead of dwelling on her confusion any further, Rhea chose to lighten the mood with a bit of self deprecating humour. "And I thought my shit with Liv was dramatic."

Dakota chuckled. "Yeah, well, you don't need to be queer to make a mess."

Rhea stared at her new maybe-friend blankly, belatedly realizing that Dakota had no way of knowing which ways she swung. Was clarifying at that point odd? Clearly it wasn't like the truth would be received poorly - but she couldn't be sure that it would stay between them either. The Kiwi liked to talk. Not that it really mattered, but Rhea just wasn't sure how vulnerable people got with friends right away when it came to things that ultimately didn't affect them.

After staring the Kiwi down for a moment in contemplation, a similarly confused look crossed Dakota's gaze before being replaced by a strange, somewhat embarrassed look.

"I'm not-" Rhea began,

"I shouldn't have-" Dakota started at the same time, the pair of them clashing awkwardly and both trailing off at once. Total disharmony.

Before either of them could fight to get a word in, or lapse into an awkward mutual silence over some unclear miscommunication, their phones chimed in tandem. Rhea's head whipped to read the text that flashed across the screen of her still upright phone that lay before her:

weird japanese girl!?□, to you and **King Kota**💪□□□□💥

What!?□😳😩

Call!!□➡📱 *Please* □

For a brief moment, Rhea stopped to wonder when the hell she had saved Dakota's number as that, before a surge of panic overwhelmed everything else. She exchanged a look with the woman in question.

"She's going to bloody murder me six ways to Sunday."

Dakota's eyes, while wide and anxious, contradicted the shake of her head as she hurriedly flagged down the bartender to settle up. "She's not! Shayna maybe but..." The brunette trailed off, throwing a wad of bills down on the counter and quickly sliding off of the bar stool to grab at Rhea's arm and tug her along. "Let's just get out of here and call her together, okay?"

With a groan, Rhea followed, already dreading facing the brutal consequences of her own actions.

For Iyo, time moved strangely after landing in her home country. Perhaps it was due to the exhaustion of the past weeks catching up to her at last, but life blurred until all that was left was a mess of mundane actions. It felt a lot like quarantine had - she may not be isolated in a strange land, with little but her cat and a strict training schedule to keep her sane - but it still seemed as though something fundamental had shifted, leaving the fragments of normalcy sticking out of her like needles. The woman was irritable at the best of moments, an utter zombie at the worst.

Her meeting with Dakota before departing had done little to dispel the surreal feeling that clung to her like a fog. They had caught a quick breakfast together before heading through security, and tried to

connect to one another. While Iyo hadn't expected an apology, reason, or retribution on the other's behalf, Dakota still spiralled in panic through the meeting. Her apologies were unneeded, the guilt she felt from no fault of her own.

It seemed the desperation to cling to the past had escaped Iyo and found its home in her instead. She didn't recall much of what she said to her former partner - but recalled taking her hands and asking her to look after both of her tag team partners over the course of the time she'd miss. It was a lot to expect of anyone, but the hope was that IC would keep Kairi busy, a vessel to channel her energies into, and Rhea would stay well enough away without a booked match to complicate things. Nonetheless, the responsibility seemed to age Dakota - just like Iyo, the past had a way of haunting her all too keenly.

The trepidation with which Dakota nodded was far from reassuring, but miraculously the entire ordeal had begun to feel so unreal that it troubled Iyo little. Whatever occurred from that point on wouldn't be in her control any longer.

Beyond that point, Iyo remembered little of the first several days of her break. The long flight had felt like barely a blip in time, yet the first hours at home in Japan dragged endlessly. She slept much of it off. When she wasn't asleep, she felt that she did little except exist, stumbling her way through holiday preparations without connection or conscious thought. Her singular text to Rhea informing her she was home safe was businesslike in efficiency. The handful she had received in return remained unread.

Iyo hadn't kept up with even the most rudimentary of exercises, the soreness of her neglected body finally snapping her out of her stupor enough to spend a sleepless night doing yoga in the guest room. By the time Friday morning dawned, Mio's patience had been expended. As Iyo crept into the kitchen at the break of dawn, hoping only to grab enough food to keep her going, she was greeted by the sight of her sister awaiting her arrival.

Mio was seated at their small kitchen island, the woman's dark, blunt-cut hair tucked behind her ears. Her expression, though stormy and intimidating, was one of worry. On the stove before her, a pot of rice porridge was keeping warm. As teenagers, they had been as close as any siblings could ever hope to be - but time and their burgeoning careers had caused them to drift apart. Really, it had been Iyo's move to America that had put their familial relationship back into perspective for her. Without the ability to go see her sister whenever

she liked, or the requirement of spending hours every day working together, Iyo had floundered.

But having someone know her as well as Mio did had its downsides too. There was no such thing as privacy where her sister was concerned. The older woman had always had the uncanny ability to read Iyo like a book. Even in the years that followed the younger woman's move overseas, she never lost her ability to know her sibling in intimate detail.

"Sit and eat," Mio ordered succinctly. "You can't keep to yourself forever. We all care about you, but Asuka and I aren't about to let you mope your entire holiday away - you already slept through Christmas." She patted the barstool beside her.

Iyo hesitated in the doorway, eyes darting back to the staircase she had crept down, tempted to escape back into the solitude of her guest room. However, her sister had a commanding presence that she could never ignore for long. Even when dressed in the adorable fluffy pajamas Asuka had gifted her. The younger woman slid onto the seat beside Mio with a huff.

"I've not been moping," Iyo lied through her teeth, "I just haven't felt up to doing much. It was a long flight and the jet lag hit hard." Her eyes fell to her feet.

Her sister scoffed, serving up a bowl of porridge as she did. Iyo dug in gratefully, eager to have something to busy herself with while receiving the harsh scolding. "Stupid. The last time you came back to Japan, you barely stopped moving long enough to breathe." Iyo couldn’t argue that - her times back in Japan came so briefly and infrequently that she was usually desperate to make the most of every moment she could. Her itinerary was always packed, spending time with every old member of Queens' Quest she could, as well as many more of her wrestling and non-wrestling friends. And, of course, spending plenty of time catching up with Mio and trying her best to be a good aunt to the child she rarely saw. The contrast was obvious. There was no explaining away how miserable she felt, not when her emotions were such a mess.

Taking a spoonful of porridge into her mouth while she thought through how she could possibly convey all that was on her mind easily, Iyo was surprised when Mio instead beat her to the punch.

"Kairi will overcome this. She just needs you to put your foot down

with her."

Iyo coughed ungracefully, wincing at how loud it seemed in the early morning hush of the house. The last thing she needed was to add a grumpy Asuka to the equation. "How did you..." the younger woman whispered harshly after managing to swallow back her food.

Her sister's expression was quite critical. "You realize we watch the show...? We may not have the full picture, but I can tell when something's a work or a shoot with you. So she's upset you're finally moving on with your life?"

To be frank, Iyo wasn't certain herself, but as far as she could tell, Mio had the right assessment of things. Just in a much blunter manner than Iyo would have liked to admit to. For years, even when facing each other as foes, Iyo had carried a torch for Kairi that the older woman had long acknowledged and nurtured, though she had never returned her feelings in earnest. There was mutual admiration, respect, and love, but it would never grow into the romantic attention that Iyo had truly craved. Accepting that had been difficult for her, and while the flame lessened with time, it never truly snuffed out - the pain of Kairi exploring new heights without her turning the burn of affection into one of determination to meet her again.

Without Kairi, Iyo wasn't sure she would have persevered in moving across the globe to start making a name for herself all over again. But because of her, Iyo felt all the more alone when, time and time again, the older woman proved that she didn't consider Iyo's feelings at all when making career-shaping decisions. Nor should she - she would never expect such a thing, and truly had accepted the status quo, even when those harsh reminders made it difficult. Ultimately, Kairi was Iyo's dearest friend, and their every reunion was a joy not because of any ulterior motives, but simply because living life next to such a charming, goofy, and magnetic woman was the only life Iyo knew.

Yet it appeared now that Kairi's open acceptance of Iyo's feelings went further than simply being flattered by them. If her shift in attitude was any indication, it seemed she expected that unwavering loyalty from Iyo. Not that she had lost it, but Rhea's more central appearance in her life had seemed to cause a deep shift in the older woman's facade, as though she could inherently sense something that Iyo herself had yet to fully pinpoint. That Kairi might feel possessive and jealous of that connection, after all this time, was a thought that stoked the old flame in a way that Iyo didn't quite want to admit to.

After all, if she did, it meant accepting a great deal of her past was spent with the object of her affections stringing her along, hoping to benefit off her feelings without ever intending to return them. While it seemed an awful thought to consider of someone as dear to her as Kairi, the older woman had certainly seemed a lot less caring about Iyo's own feelings about their situation, given how she was acting of late. As though Rhea's presence by her side could be dispelled by childish tantrums, and claims that Rhea was somehow more inherently untrustworthy than Iyo herself was. Which Kairi of all people knew wasn't the case.

Iyo's spoon scraped the bottom of her bowl, finding that she had drowned her entire breakfast away with her stormy thoughts. She was no closer to a resolution alone than she had been over the past days of torturing herself in the same manner, so confessing her woes to Mio would have to do.

"There's not many friends I haven't turned on," she rationalized aloud, finally letting her sister into her innermost thoughts, "Maybe she thinks this is her time. I don't know. She doesn't seem to be as understanding as I'd hoped. Would it be different if it wasn't Rhea? I'm not sure."

Her older sister looked at her for a long, drawn-out moment, seemingly sizing up whether it was better to push or to leave it alone. "She doesn't think you'd betray her. If you did, Asuka would kick your ass in a heartbeat. So would I, honestly. I think it's clear what this is about, but it's not right of her to react this poorly to you finally getting a girlfriend."

Iyo spluttered, a rare blush erupting on her face. "Rhea's not-"

"Fine, so she doesn't know, but that's frankly a matter of time. If I can see it from an ocean away, so can Kairi." The older woman chided, not allowing her sister any leeway with explaining herself further. Times like this, Iyo wished Mio was more oblivious, turning to hide her expression from further interrogation. Implying that Rhea could return whatever carefully controlled attraction Iyo felt towards her felt like trading a hand grenade for a nuke. Her tumultuous relationship with the Pirate Princess was bad enough.

"I knew it." A voice sounded from the entrance to the kitchen, the pink-haired head of Asuka peeking past the door-frame playfully. Her face was lit with mischief. "Pay up, honey. What have I been saying since November? That's right. I told you she's got a crush!" she

exclaimed softly, dancing into the room in the most embarrassing way she could muster. If dealing with Mio's prying was bad, her sister-in-law's teasing was even worse.

Mio rolled her eyes, standing to greet Asuka with a chaste kiss. "I never took that bet, nobody sane would." She chided her wife.

The youngest member of Triple Tails groaned, letting her forehead fall against the counter-top. "I'm going to kill you two... betting about my romantic life, how pathetic do you think I am?" While it wasn't like Iyo was trying to obscure her affections for Rhea any - she wasn't really the type to be shy about expressing her fondness for others - the last thing she needed was for anyone else to make it out to be something more than it was. Their partnership was already fragile enough without having to factor in interpersonal issues. "That will never go anywhere, even if she was interested."

Her sister murmured something unintelligible to her wife, who backed off a step. Iyo loved Asuka, she did, but the two had been at each other's throats more than once due to the older woman's brazen and always-playful attitude. Mio was the expert at curtailing her into a more manageable, less infuriating person. "We will revisit this in the future," Asuka stressed, "but you're right. Sorry. Bigger fish in the pond."

Iyo peeked through her fingertips at Asuka, nonchalantly setting about preparing a pot of coffee for herself and Mio. The Empress of Tomorrow's movements were a little more stiff than in previous days - though she knew better than to pester the woman about her recovery, she had noted Asuka seemed a bit lax about reporting back on her physio regimen as of late. The recovery process was a frustrating one - but Iyo knew the woman would share her difficulties when she was ready, the same way that Asuka knew Iyo would express herself on her own terms.

"What should I do about Kairi, then?" the youngest asked the room. "It's not about her, or Rhea, or my feelings at all. But how do I get that through to her?" She didn't miss how Asuka and Mio exchanged another long look, as though they had their own silent conversation, before the former spoke up.

"Give her time to self-destruct on her own. She's always been the type to collapse into her little inner world, right?" Iyo nodded slowly. Really, of all the members of Damage Ctrl, it was she and Kairi who kept their thoughts and feelings to themselves until they were fully

formed. The Pirate Princess even moreso than Iyo, who did have the occasional impulse she followed - her current situation being a result of just that. Oddly, Kairi's actions over the past week looked a hell of a lot like one of Iyo's own destructive impulses, yet if what she said in their pre-match promo was true, she was still negotiating her thoughts about matters. Honestly, she felt bad for leaving Dakota to traverse this mess alone. "Key part is, you need to let her hit the point right before her mind's made up to get through to her."

Mio hummed in agreement. She had fetched out a trio of personalized mugs for them - Asuka's a gawdy clash of colours next to Mio's simple purple and gold floral design, and Iyo's scarcely used black mug painted with a cat's face. "When the time comes, be firm with her. She may have a right to be protective over her best friend, but she doesn't have the right to dictate your choices. Or your romantic interests, even if it comes to that." That last bit was added with a teasing wink in Iyo's direction. She groaned.

"Thank you both." Iyo finally gave in. "Sorry for hiding out on you."

It was hard, knowing she was going to be missing out on all the action as her team fought to hold a brand new title, potentially against each other. To not know exactly what state her faction would be left in upon her return. Most of all, it was hard to feel like she was the catalyst of any of their problems, even if that wasn't the full truth. But for the moment, watching Asuka and Mio joke and tease one another over an early morning's breakfast, her heart felt just that bit warmer. This was her foundation. Whatever came, and whatever happened, Triple Tails would always be at her side.

But now that Asuka had been a gentle pain in her ass, it was time to repay the favour the best way she knew how. Getting the both of them back on track. "So... up for a jog?"

The eldest woman grumbled into her coffee mug, stretching out her bad knee conspicuously. If she thought that would garner her sympathy, she was sorely mistaken. "Uh, I should watch the kids-"

"I've got them handled," Mio interrupted before turning back to Iyo, a look of simple gratitude on her face that she rarely showed to others, "It's been so long since you two have been able to work out together. Let's go, Damage Ctrl!" she cheered in her best impression of their faction's intro.

With a grin, the younger woman offered a hand out to Asuka, helping

pull her to her feet. It was nice, she reflected, to have others who cared for her so much, pushing her when it was necessary to do so. Returning the favour was the least she could do.

It was late morning by the time Asuka and Iyo returned to the house, the younger woman taking the opportunity to fully work through Asuka's rehab regimen with her. The reason behind her stagnation was made immediately apparent, the older woman's stubborn refusal to pace herself now that she had regained moderate mobility shining through every exercise they attempted. To be expected of the woman who had wrestled for months through the injury to begin with. If Asuka could physically do something, she tried to, regardless of whether the movement was safe or repeatable - and when it wasn't, got frustrated at the outcome. Iyo felt her own past injuries emerge as phantom pains just witnessing Asuka soldier on.

Eventually, after the fifth time physically stopping Asuka from trying to surpass her prescribed regimen, the Empress of Tomorrow at last succumbed to Iyo's silent condemnations. The rest of the workout, though slow and rudimentary for wrestlers of their calibre, went smoothly.

Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast. That was one thing Iyo's NXT instructors had managed to drill into her. Risks had their time and place, but a spot that could only ever be done once, even to roaring success, had far less value than one that could be done every week to moderate reception. She could only hope that her longest-standing partner in the industry would manage to internalize that lesson when she wasn't around to intervene.

Asuka trudged slowly, but more smoothly, to the front door, letting them in whilst grumbling that she would somehow get even with Iyo. With a chuckle, Iyo simply gave Asuka a pat on the butt and moved past her, her mood finally rebounding.

At least, it had until Mio rounded the corner into the living room, Iyo's buzzing phone in hand.

"You left it in your room," her sister explained, "It hasn't stopped buzzing for hours... Kairi keeps calling."

"Motherfucker," Iyo swore under her breath in English, making a rare exception to her typically clean language. She grabbed the phone from Mio and took stock of her notifications, Asuka hovering over her shoulder nosily.

Since she left her room at 5am, she had two missed calls from Dakota and a text message, six texts from Rhea at a similar time - all still within her Do Not Disturb schedule. As moderately eyebrow-raising as that was, the truly alarming thing was the numerous texts from Kairi and ten missed calls starting at 6am. Every half hour, on the dot - the final one from just a moment ago.

She navigated first to her messages with Dakota.

🐶 🩶**Queen Kai**□□♀□👑

We have a situation back here.. PFC a-fuckin-gain. Shayna got Kairi's arm pretty bad, she's with the docs getting checked out. Rhea saved my knee at least 🐶

Without hesitation, she flipped over to Rhea's.

Rhea☠□🩶

I landed safely. □

Hell yeah!

Rest up, you've earned it 😈

Tried out that whole yoga thing today... my joints aren't happy □ *How tf do you manage*

I fucked up

Shayna attacked Kairi

Sprained her wrist

Still not sure how bad

Tried to help but made it worse

Kota got jumped too but is ok

Iyo exhaled heavily through her mouth, exchanging a glance with Asuka who was still peering over her shoulder at the phone.

"Motherfucker." Asuka agreed.

"If I'm not back downstairs in an hour, assume Kairi has managed to reach through the phone to kill me." Iyo tried to joke, though she

wouldn't doubt if that was the outcome. First and foremost, she had to clarify what exactly had occurred, as the subtle contradictions between Dakota and Rhea's messages were running rampant through her mind, and there was little point trying to survey the damage with Kairi until hearing an outside perspective. Hurrying to her room, she locked the door behind her for the small modicum of privacy it afforded, before opening a group message to both Dakota and Rhea, requesting that one of them call her.

Fortunately, she didn't have to wait long before a Facetime request appeared across her screen from Rhea. Of course, this had to happen while Iyo was fresh off of a workout, but there wasn't much sense worrying about her appearance at a time like this.

To her surprise, when she answered, both Rhea and Dakota's faces appeared in frame. They looked to be in the back of an Uber, the Kiwi rattling off her address to the driver as Rhea fixed Iyo with the most stressed out grin she could imagine. The Eradicator's canines glinted in the dim light, making for a threatening figure if not for the frenetic energy that paired with it.

"I didn't mean to!" Rhea said in way of greeting.

"Oh for gods... give me the phone," Dakota ordered, coming closer into view as it was shuffled over. "Sorry babe, she's sloshed. It's been a long day."

Iyo blinked blankly, adapting back to the use of English slowly. It didn't help that both of the women were slurring, obviously heading home from a bar. Typically, Dakota was more of a smoker than a drinker, so Iyo could only pin the blame on that one for Rhea. She sighed, pushing her bangs back from her face and mustering up her best scare-them-sober glare. "Talk slow. Tell me what happened."

The Kiwi's brow furrowed in concern, turning to half-whisper to Rhea, "Nah, fam, you might've been right."

"I told you she'd bloody -"

"Focus," Iyo barked, reverting to Japanese in her irritation. "No one is making sense. Kairi's called me way too many times, and I am afraid to answer before I know what's going on. Be serious!"

The pair of drunken women glanced back and forth between each other for a few moments, exchanging a couple low, confused words as they cobbled together their combined knowledge of Japanese. Good.

They could understand what someone rambling incoherently and emotionally at them in a foreign language was like.

"Sorry," Dakota tried again, slower and more conscious of her rambling this time. "We went to the Performance Centre to get in some practice matches before IC on Monday. Ran into Rhea there."

"I was watching Lyra and some other girl wrestle. Trying to learn like you've been asking," Rhea offered, taking over her part of the story. "They came in and it was awkward, so I left. Ran into those assholes on the way out." While the goth was doing her best to speak calmly and clearly, she kept averting her gaze from the camera, turning away to face the car window in a way that muffled her voice.

"Wondered why you came back all of a sudden," Dakota mused. The streetlights barely illuminated the pair as the vehicle moved through the city, making it difficult for Iyo to gauge either of their expressions.

"They... stopped me to talk," Rhea's voice softened, cutting out bits and pieces. "...asked about... Iyo... was weird... a hunch."

Thankfully, Dakota was a fair bit clearer. "So Kairi and I are setting up for our practice session, then all of a sudden Sonya's sliding in and demanding we clear out and forfeit our IC matches. Kairi let Sonya have it, like fully vented all her shit out. Then all of a sudden Shayna's shoving her into the turnbuckle, and Zoey's kicked me in the damn head and starts grabbing at my knee..." She trailed off for second, the faint light catching her exchange a look with Rhea.

"Just tell her the truth, I will anyway." The younger woman grumbled.

Iyo's expression spoke for itself, as Dakota soldiered on quickly enough. "Well. I don't see Rhea come in, she's just all of a sudden plowing Zoey off me, and Sonya's on the mat bleeding, and she's just going HAM on Zoey. That's when I see Shayna's got Kairi in a lock I know she can break her arm in like nothing. So we're like, Mexican standoff, and Shayna tells Rhea to get off of Zoey."

Rhea groans lowly, her face fully pressed to the car window just at the edge of the camera's frame. "And I fuckin' don't, because I'm fuckin' stupid."

"So she doesn't, because she doesn't trust Shayna to really let Kairi go, because why the hell would you?" The Kiwi argued back at Rhea, reaching out to comfortingly pat at the Eradicator's shoulder. Something in the last span of hours had shifted between the two, their

demeanour with one another as friendly as could be hoped for. A shame it had come through such grim events. "Shayna didn't break Kairi's arm, thankfully, but did sprain her wrist. So I kicked the fuck out of her, and everyone goes their separate ways before anyone gets killed. We take Kairi to medical, there's so much paperwork, and Kairi's so angry..."

"So we go and get shitfaced," Rhea finished succinctly. Dakota nodded firmly.

Iyo thought the events through, from start to finish, filling in what she could of the explanation based on her own understanding of all the individuals involved. She rolled a couple points over in her mind again, and again, before asking, "Kairi... 'vented her shit'?"

The older woman blinked slowly, rewinding through her telling of the story until recalling the point Iyo was asking for clarification on. "Uh. Kairi yelled at Sonya, mostly in Japanese, and then slapped her."

Rhea straightened up at that, coming back into the light a little more prominently. Her eyes shimmered just slightly, Iyo noted - wondering whether that was a product of inebriation, exhaustion, or emotion. But, judging by her alert stance, she hadn't been witness to the inciting incident.

The escalation against Kairi made a fair bit more sense with the clarification. "So she started the fight," Iyo reasoned evenly, trying to keep her own emotions in check, though every bit of her demanded to get on a plane that very moment to go seek revenge. It wouldn't fix things. "Rhea, did you think Shayna would hurt her?"

The goth sighed. Her response was laboured. "Yes, but I thought she'd get hurt more if I let Zoey go."

It made sense. Iyo had to ask herself, had she been there, would she have done any different? For Kairi, she would have packed it in immediately... but, what if it had been Dakota in the same circumstances?

Did it make Iyo a terrible friend if her answer differed between the two?

"I won't blame you for Shayna's actions," she administered her judgment on the matter. "Kairi got herself and Dakota into trouble. It would have been worse without you there. But she isn't going to agree."

Dakota nodded her agreement at Iyo's every word, as though sharing in her innermost thoughts. How wrong she would be, for even as Iyo spoke, she felt extreme turmoil and an utter lack of confidence in her conclusion. There was simply no other way to see it, no easy path to take that would placate everyone.

The younger woman ducked her head, bangs obscuring her expression. "I know that... I'm sorry."

Hearing that rare admission caused whatever residual misplaced frustration Iyo felt to freeze over, at least temporarily. In their business, apologies were few and far between, especially when dealing with someone as brash as Rhea. "Stay out of trouble, and try to give her space." Iyo cautioned, drawing from her own conversation with Mio and Asuka not so long ago. "Just leave us to control the damage."

Chapter 5: damage

Chapter Notes

had to get this one out before summerslam hits...

this is also the point where i plug my writing playlist for this fic since the title inspo/team name finally comes up :) arbitrary plug of deezer, but here's a spotify equivalent too.

Not that she would ever admit it, but Rhea really had been scared shitless of Iyo's reaction. Dakota definitely hadn't helped. Once the call had ended she had crumbled into a worried drunken spiel, stressing that the last time she had seen Iyo look like that, the Japanese woman had demolished their dressing room. Odd to think that while anger for Iyo was a rare thing, she dealt with it much in the same ways that Rhea did - ergo, poorly.

So when she awoke to her workout alarm the next morning, about as hungover as expected, Rhea was shocked to find a handful of texts from Iyo left over the course of the night.

weird japanese girl!?□

More yoga. □□♀□ *This is why your balance is terrible.* □😩

How is training? 🏋□♀□

Rhea typed out half a response before her brain caught up, deleting it all and staggering her way to the bathroom to take a painkiller and splash some water on her face. She had wanted to respond that it had been slow going, and she had just woken up, but then felt self-conscious about her 8am start time in contrast to Iyo, who seemed to constantly be up at 6am at the latest. Then, she had thought about making the obvious excuse - but after everything, was she really the one that deserved to be slacking off? No, so the only answer she could feasibly respond with was the evidence that she would put in the effort even on days where she felt like rolling over dead.

She was the one who had shit to make up for, after all.

A half an hour later, she was set up in her little garage gym, going through the very same warm ups that Iyo knew she loathed.

Goddamn sun salutations.

That, at least, was a text she could feel alright about sending. Once she finished what Rhea thought would pass for a halfway decent set of sequences, she moved onto weight training. It was leg day, unfortunately - her personal weakness, and in her condition, she couldn't manage to move even her usual amount of weight. But slowly, her body and brain began to sharpen even through the exhaustion. While Iyo had been teasing, she wasn't wrong that there was a reason Rhea kept to the ground in the ring. And whatever the Eradicator was bad at, she avoided like the plague.

About halfway through her second set of squats, Rhea's phone buzzed again.

If you learn how to walk on the top rope, I will learn how to Riptide. 🌊

It was the little details that got Rhea. The woman's habitual overuse of emojis, the way that she thought to respond more quickly than she had been. Her support, even in light of something that anyone else would have written Rhea off for - Iyo's best friend included. Even the fact that she was responding relatively late at night, making Rhea consider if she was still fighting off jet lag.

She was still staring down at her phone, ignoring the way her muscles ached in favour of rereading Iyo's messages and musing to herself, when the phone buzzed again in her hand. The screen lit up entirely with Iyo's contact name and a picture of the two of them from War Games that Rhea didn't recall setting, announcing her Facetime request.

Rhea panicked and declined the call, and then panicked and called back immediately. Of course, this had to happen while she was in the midst of a workout, but with a fragile friendship to consider, she couldn't stop to worry about her appearance.

The phone rang three times before Iyo answered, picture jostling and blurring as she came into focus. She sat cross-legged on a bed, dim street lighting streaming in the window behind her. A lamp at her bedside provided a bit more illumination, capturing Iyo's exhausted looking features.

"I misclicked." Iyo explained.

"Oh," Rhea responded sheepishly, cringing internally at herself for sounding so obviously disappointed. Putting the usual sardonic wit into her words took conscious effort. "Here I thought you just wanted to criticize my form."

Iyo's lips twisted into a smirk, the woman's eyes narrowing. "But you called back. Brave," She paused to yawn slightly, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. "It's ok, it's hard to sleep."

Not terribly convincing, but Iyo hadn't jumped to excuse herself either. It was a bit embarrassing, but so too was awkwardly hanging up again. "Well, you up for a bedtime weight lifting stream then? I'm doing legs..."

Iyo's smile brightened. "Challenge is good. Just forget I'm here." She shifted for a few moments, setting her phone down sideways across a bedside table before propping herself up against the wall, half-crouched. Regardless of whether she was perched like that on the corner of a ring, or the corner of her bed an ocean away at a 90 degree angle, Iyo's posture always had a way of making Rhea feel like she was within striking distance of danger.

It was beginning to grow on her.

"You're the boss. Here we go, legs, let's see if we can't make 'em work for once," Rhea mocked herself, taking her position to squat again.

While Rhea found she was more self-conscious in making sure her form was proper, and she was getting as low as she could, her reps did seem to go more smoothly. Even considering the added exhaustion from the night before, and the insecure way her focus routinely flickered between Iyo and her own reflection in the mirror. Throughout, Iyo said nothing, only giving an encouraging nod of the head to acknowledge the end of the set.

The next set went by quickly. And so did the next. Before long, she had shifted to lunges, and then to deadlifts. It wasn't until she turned to clarify she was loading the bar with a bit less weight than normal that Rhea realized Iyo's eyes had slipped shut, having nodded off in her upright state.

Liar. She really had stayed awake to watch her. Even when the only reason for her interest was probably to keep Rhea's spirits up through the workout.

Rhea walked over to her phone carefully to mute the microphone, avoiding any chance that she would wake the older woman. As she did, she took a moment to observe Iyo carefully. It looked like she was meditating, the same way she often did backstage before matches. The younger woman recalled that Iyo was a mind over matter type of a person - something akin to the old cheesy childhood saying of "If you

dream it, you can do it". Except in the older woman's case, that was genuinely how it worked. If Iyo said she would win going into a match, she wasn't often wrong. Any doubt at all, and she walked out with her head hung low.

It was Rhea's first time actually seeing the woman sleep. They were even now, she supposed, recalling the way Iyo had let her snooze through dinner on Monday, though not for evident lack of trying. No sense in waking her. A grumpy Iyo wasn't something Rhea particularly wanted to see, either.

She looked peaceful, as though the worries of the world were gone for a long moment. Even through the camera, Rhea could hear Iyo's steady breathing, deep and even, the sound a soothing rhythm in the otherwise quiet garage. It was a calm Rhea hadn't really seen her have since... Honestly, she couldn't recall. Perhaps since before losing her title at Wrestlemania.

Rhea could relate. Ever since Liv had cost her the championship, she had felt like the entire world was something to be overcome. How could she rest when after all she had accomplished, she was simply back to square one? And now, she had to think about whether or not she was weighing down another woman who was struggling with the exact same climb. And fucking up her friends' shots at glory, at the same time.

Rhea was trying to be better, but would that ever really make up for how she had failed to help when it had counted the most? Next time had to be different. She would be ready, dependable, and she would learn from her mistakes. She had to, or she would never hold that title again - and neither would the next most deserving person she could think of.

So Rhea soldiered on in her efforts, glancing over from time to time to check in on Iyo. Eventually, the older woman shifted and comically tipped over to a normal sleeping position, and Rhea was sure she had awoken. But sleep on she did, even as Rhea climbed onto the treadmill to wrap up her workout.

Hanging up on her felt wrong, but so too did picking the phone back up and walking around with it, the call ongoing like bearing witness to that level of vulnerability was normal. So, after toweling herself down, Rhea walked back over to the phone, observing for another minute or so to make sure Iyo was really asleep, before tapping the hang-up button and locking her screen. The silence in her garage was

deafening, and it felt colder somehow, as if Rhea could somehow feel the other woman's absence. She shook her head.

Her war with the quiet would just have to rage on.

weird japanese girl □

We should have a mascot. 🐈‍⬛■

A cat??

A black cat. I like black cats, and it is tough looking for you! 💪□

And what, we go out to the ring with… a cat???

No, that would be stressful. 😹 *Face masks!* 🎭 *Like you wore at War Games.*

I used to wear a bear mask. 🐼 *Remember?*

Frankly, Rhea could barely believe that one of the most ambitious, calculating, and skilled women she knew - the very same one that had managed to cow her into an embarrassing state of obedience in such a short time - was simultaneously so… ridiculous.

Iyo hadn't made any mention of falling asleep during their video call, but nonetheless their weekend had managed to develop into an oddly lighthearted back and forth of traded texts, calls, and voice memos - each seeking to keep their counterpart on track emotionally and physically. How they had gotten into discussing the frustrating nature of team marketing was simply beyond Rhea, but once they had, Iyo was like a dog with a bone. For every tenth idea she had, the Australian would entertain a single one.

This… was not one of those ideas. Rhea sighed, jabbing at her tv remote to pause the old match footage she had been reviewing. *Of course,* Rhea wanted to say, all sharp edges and none of the usual fuzzy fondness, *hard to forget your lucha fangirl days.* It was hard to pinpoint why she felt so annoyed - it could have been the tangential reminder of her ex's shitty father, who Iyo had always admired for reasons utterly surreal to Rhea. Or perhaps she really was just so hopelessly bitter that any amount of another person's joy wore on her.

She doubted either was really the root of the idiotic angst she was subjecting herself to, but nonetheless had to reign in the impulse to throw in a barbed comment mocking Iyo for thinking that Rhea somehow didn't recall her past career. A twinge of insecurity wormed its way back and forth in her chest, wondering whether the inverse was true. If pressed, would Iyo remember random trivia-night level facts about Rhea's early career - and why did that matter to Rhea?

Couldn't forget it

Not my thing…

Can we go back to trying to find entrance music?

If they play mine again for us I'm going to kill someone

Subtlety had never been her strong suit, but she had to hope the abrupt subject change was read with greater care than it was written with. Rhea wasn't lying, anyhow. Having now watched their match against Damage Ctrl from the perspective of the audience at home, hearing *Demon In Your Dreams* while seeing Iyo emerge really did make her want to smash the production team's face in.

That wasn't *them*. Not that Rhea knew who *they* were yet, but it certainly was a far more restrained version of the Eradicator that emerged by Iyo's side. And a far more domineering version of the Genius of the Sky in turn, absolute childlike abuse of her emoji keyboard notwithstanding.

Iyo didn't respond for a while, leaving the Australian to return to reviewing her past tag match history with a grimace. Perhaps her brash response had been picked up upon, though she hoped the older woman was simply otherwise occupied. While her responses had been very punctual since the night of Kairi's injury, Rhea had to remind herself that Iyo was still supposed to be enjoying her vacation. Frustration wasn't something to be saddling her partner with for… well, no reason Rhea could verbalize without sounding crazy, frankly.

You don't like my suggestions.. 😾

The buzz of her phone had Rhea instantly snapping her attention away from the screen, where a younger Liv Morgan was in the midst of saving her ass from getting pinned. Not that she really wanted to stroll down that memory lane. Stupid tiny perky daredevil menace.

Rhea sighed at the message. Dramatic, but genuine, as Iyo often was.

Yeah, she had picked up on her piss poor mood. The Eradicator whipped her attention back to her TV at the sound of the match bell, quickly flicking off the screen before she was forced to watch Liv eagerly jump into her past self's arms. Just the way that Iyo always did.

She really needed to go spend some time with her punching bag. Not having a match this week would drive her to insanity if she had to spend much longer stuck thinking through her nauseating emotions. For now, she'd just have to tamp things down and try not to burn the only bridge she had.

I do! But…

It's all in Japanese

Yours are all in English. 🐱

Expecting more, Rhea stared at her phone - only to realize that no, that relatively brusque message from Iyo was it, just as her previous statement had been. Dammit, why were feelings so easy to hurt? Of course, Iyo had a point. Anything that was strictly in one language or the other couldn't really convey the nature of their partnership. It had to be…

Another buzz.

LINK: BABYMETAL x @ElectricCallboy - RATATATA (OFFICIAL VIDEO)

This one!!! 🐱

…something that reflected them both. Exactly. One problem with the otherwise fantastic suggestion, that she had no choice but to point out, no matter how much she was trying to be be less of a fucking buzzkill.

They used that for Bash in Berlin □

Rhea… ≽^□ω□^≼

Pls don't use those emojis again I can't deal

I like it but they're not gonna approve it

The annoyance was back, but this time fully focused on herself. Their chemistry was off, just like it had been in their practice matches together, and Rhea could see clearly that it was her own fault she

wasn't meshing with Iyo. While the older woman seemed to be able to put her issues aside to make things work, Rhea just… couldn't. Every message was like a visceral reminder of the way she had ruined partnerships as enjoyable and easy as this before. A self-fulfilling prophecy, all because Rhea was too fucking scared to be as openly excited as Iyo was being with her.

Rhea couldn't think about it anymore. If this was going to work, she had to give as much as she got.

What about Poppy? You liked her before

Girls In Bikinis! 😈□□♀□👌□

The immediate response was a source of baffling whiplash. Just like that, Iyo was back to exuberant, leaving Rhea to wonder if she had ever been upset at all.

And what the hell kind of song idea was that? *Iyo, what…* Rhea began to type, then, *That doesn't even really describe either of us?* , before erasing the message again, because well, it did sort of describe Rhea, maybe. It might not even be a suggestion, just a song Iyo enjoyed. As Rhea sat there, typing and un-typing, she couldn't help but feel she was definitely reading too far into things, but Iyo had to get the implication that Poppy was doing a bit more than appreciating the girls she was singing about, surely?

Rhea stared at her screen, the tentative *Do you …* shining up at her when Iyo's typing bubble re-appeared. Embarrassed at how long she had been typing for at this point, the Australian hurriedly deleted what she was typing once more and rushed out a single word.

Nevermind

Wait!!!

Iyo's text popped up at nearly the exact same time Rhea's was sent. So maybe she hadn't seen Rhea struggling to compose a coherent response. Good.

If you say something from Arcane again I'm gonna turn off my phone

Even if I do look like whoever Vi is 🙄

Hopefully that was enough to offset any offense Iyo might take at Rhea's relatively blunt response prior, adding in a jokey barbed

comment at mostly Dakota's expense. Their brief, though chaotic group chat consisted mostly of the two insisting that Rhea watch whatever random video game anime thing they were obsessed with. Specifically Dakota, who sent a plethora of fanart of herself as a crazy blue haired lady and Rhea as a pink haired punk.

She hadn't pretended to understand then, but Iyo's simple insistence that she resembled the character during some kind of goth phase was… flattering, maybe.

No!!

LINK: Bring Me The Horizon - Kingslayer (Lyric Video) ft. BABYMETAL

Rhea didn't have to click. Honestly, she was surprised and embarrassed she hadn't thought of the suggestion before now, as utterly appropriate as it was. There was no thought at all in her response.

Oh

Fuck yea!

Instantaneous agreement. With their music decided upon, Rhea locked her phone and tried not to think about her excitable partner's choice of emoji, or any of the parallels she was beginning to see between past and present. Iyo wasn't Liv.

Things were different now, even if Rhea's choice of emotional suppression was still trudging to her garage to beat the everloving crap out of a bag on a chain.

King Kota

Good luck today mate

Gonna be in the back watching if you need anything. You and Kairi got this

Thanks dude.. backups always welcome

Monday rolled around, and though she had no appearance scheduled that week, Rhea nonetheless hunkered down at the venue. While she had no dressing room of her own to watch from, all it took was a short conversation with Cathy Kelley and a lopsided grin shot her way before she had access to the interviewer's own monitor station. Certainly beat watching in the group broadcast room with all the other talent that hated her guts, and Rhea didn't mind having a pretty woman to distract her from time to time.

Rhea had thought about seeking Dakota out in person to wish her luck, but decided against potentially causing any further tension with Kairi. Iyo had told her to steer clear, and so she planned to. It was really remarkable the other woman was even cleared to wrestle. From what Dakota had relayed, she didn't have full use of her right hand, and was told not to strike with that arm at all. But beyond that, her recovery window would supposedly be fairly brief if she maintained light duty. Given that her opponent, Lyra, was the trustworthy sort, their match was set to continue.

Really, it was Dakota who was set to go through the ringer, facing off against a battered and all the more enraged Zoey Stark. According to the grapevine, she was nursing a nasty shiner, though she was at least in better condition than Sonya, who had bitten through her own tongue so severely in their brawl that she needed stitches. The world would just have to live without her running her mouth for the near future.

Grudges aside, Rhea was looking forward to watching some hopefully peaceful matches. After tormenting herself with watching all she could stand of her own old matches and interrogating all she had done wrong, it was about time to start focusing on what she could do right.

Cathy settled down with a notebook, ready to take physical note of the developments in their world. Interesting really, that they were both here in different aspects, but ultimately their goals were the same. After sending Iyo a quick voice memo to confirm Rhea would be studying the matches from backstage, the women settled into a comfortable silence as Cathy's pre-filmed interview of Dakota and Kairi earlier that day aired.

"As for PFC attacking Kairi, that just goes to show that Shayna, Zoey, and Sonya don't have what it takes to beat Damage Ctrl…" Dakota bit out on screen, her frustrations clear but laser focused on her target for the night:

Zoey Stark. Beside her, Kairi nodded solemnly, a grim look on her face as she rubbed at her right arm, which was braced from her first knuckles all the way up to her elbow.

"Now I have to ask, word is that during the attack on you two, Rhea Ripley got involved. Given your match against her last week, the fans have been curious as to what's been going on behind the scenes. Are there any truth to those rumours?" Cathy ventured, sparing a cautious glance Kairi's way as her scowl deepened.

Dakota took the opportunity to steer the conversation carefully, intending to clear up any misconceptions while still keeping the circumstances behind the attack vague, "She did jump into the fray. Listen, regardless of anyone's feelings, in this business unexpected help shows up sometimes. If that makes PFC think twice in the future, then I'm grateful."

Kairi stayed conspicuously silent, her gaze unnerving as Cathy turned directly to her. "And tonight Kairi, despite sustaining an injury in that attack from PFC, you're set to face off against Lyra Valkyria. How confident are you that you're going to head to the finals?"

The woman's swoop of cobalt blue hair hung menacingly over one side of her face. She flexed the fingers of her damaged hand dangerously. "Lyra has my respect, but this isn't about her. It is about showing everyone they cannot stop me…" she hissed, adding on something in Japanese that Rhea couldn't quite make out before stalking off.

Cathy wearily turned to Dakota, who frowned worriedly as she translated: "She said… Wounds are temporary. Her fury is forever."

Rhea sighed deeply. Clearly, Kairi wasn't doing too well - though at least the older woman hadn't taken the opportunity to cuss her out again. Her words, though cutting and foreboding, were vague enough to be interpreted as solely about PFC.

Next to her, Cathy shifted to face Rhea more directly. Her expression was one of gentle trepidation. "Do you mind if I ask a question, off the record?"

"You know that depends on what it is," Rhea rumbled lowly, though flashed a grin to let her know that even if she didn't answer, there would be no hard feelings. Being nosy was in a journalist's nature, and Cathy had always been a friend even while Rhea was still terrorizing her fellow athletes. There was always a chance for betrayal, but at least from her, the worst she could do was use the Australian's words against her.

Cathy nodded. “I’ve been friends with you and Dakota for a long time… and I’ve known Iyo and Kairi for years as well, but the last few weeks… none of you have seemed quite right.” She paused, choosing her next words carefully, not from careful calculation, but rather clear concern. “There’s a lot happening… Are you all doing okay?”

Were they? Certainly, Kairi wasn’t. Whether or not she was able to get over that was another story that would just have to be determined in time. Dakota was… stressed, for sure, her role as de facto manager of the others weighing on her at a time that she really needed to be able to focus on herself.

Rhea was faring better than she had been, but trying to adapt had been taking its toll. She definitely needed some solid alone time, though her new schedule seemed to indicate she’d be getting little of it. Not that spending time with Iyo in person was that difficult. Not in comparison to the current feeling of needing to hear from the older woman constantly to ensure they were on the same page, even though she found Iyo’s texting habits enraging.

As for the woman in question, Iyo was a mystery that Rhea worried about pondering for long. She was demanding, clingy, guarded, and just plain weird all at once - but… whenever they locked gazes it was like Iyo wasn’t seeing anything else but Rhea. Her thoughts may be a mystery, but her intentions were clear. Forging a path to victory, at any cost.

“No,” Rhea summarized succinctly with a tilt of the head towards the screen which flared to life with the beginning of the next match, “but all that matters right now is the work.”

Cathy took a breath, as if to speak, but instead conceded with a single, soft word. “Okay,” she acknowledged. Her attention focused forward on the screen, where PFC’s entrance played out.

Relief washed over Rhea as Zoey entered the arena, flanked by Shayna alone. Their grisly fight earlier in the week had suitably shelved Sonya, so worst case Damage Ctrl were at a number parity - and, should things get out of hand, the advantage of Rhea close at hand. Hopefully that would be enough to keep them in line. The two still looked incensed, a few bandaged scrapes across Zoey’s face and an already fading bruise covering her abdomen. Shayna, on the other hand, untouched as she had been, looked ready for murder as she stalked behind the smaller woman to the side of the ring.

A moment later, a synthy sting that Rhea didn't recognize at all played across the arena's speakers. Her brow furrowed as the name *Dakota Kai* flashed across the monitors in new pink text. A new theme…?

"Wha-?" The Australian voiced coherently, watching as an excited Dakota raced into the arena, followed slowly by Kairi who looked every bit as broody as Shayna had.

Cathy scribbled something down in her notes before responding. "I did say a lot's been happening. It's not just you and Iyo who have been thinking about changing things up."

She could read between the lines… new music plus a run at the title could only mean Dakota had been talking promotional pushes with the higher ups for a while. Seeing the tense and sullen way that Kairi ghosted around the sides of the ring as the match came underway, it was hard to imagine the woman was as surprised as Rhea was about that bit of news.

"How long?"

To that, Cathy paused more substantially in her note-taking, the pair watching as Zoey hit Dakota with a dropkick that had her rolling out of the ring to escape. The journalist took the moment of reprieve to leaf back a few pages in her notebook. "Hard to say for sure, but likely since she came back in November."

Ergo, before Iyo and Rhea had teamed up by at least a few weeks, and something they had never been made privy to. Now it was more clear why Dakota had initially been rather guarded about their partnership. What would have been harmless ambition now looked a lot like the start of Damage Ctrl going their separate ways entirely - whether they were intending to or not.

It didn't help that Dakota hadn't said anything or that Kairi had begun to habitually resemble a kicked dog. Leaving the Pirate Princess in the dust clearly hadn't been anyone's intention, but it now looked like a grand conspiracy to do so.

Unless, a dormant, bitter part of Rhea wondered, Dakota and Iyo had been on the same page all along, and Rhea was as much a pawn to their ambitions as Kairi was. After all, could she really trust that either of the women had good intentions? As transparently hostile as Kairi was, she was the only person in the picture that Rhea truly knew where she stood with.

Rhea zoned back in just in time to see Dakota catch Zoey with a Kairopractor, the two rolling through their offensive movesets in a competitive back and forth. Behind them, Kairi and Shayna had congregated onto one side of the ring - the former patting at her brace dramatically while cursing a flurry out Shayna's way.

"It's no one's fault." Cathy laid a supportive hand on Rhea's forearm, quelling the angry tremble that was working its way through the younger woman's body. Whatever paranoias Rhea had about potentially being used, she was still tense and ready to jump to the women's defense at the slightest indication of things going south.

Thankfully, that wouldn't be needed.

The Australian let out a noisy, rattling exhale that turned into a shout of glee as Dakota caught an airborne Zoey with a superkick. Shayna made a hurried run towards the ring, but was quickly intercepted with a leg sweep from Kairi that instead sent her face first into the side of the apron as Dakota delivered the decisive, match-winning GTK.

She couldn't wait around to see if PFC would take their loss lying down. This watching backstage thing just wasn't working out for her anxious energy, which yearned to storm out to the ring at a moment's notice. So with barely a glance back Cathy's way, that's exactly what the Eradicator did.

"Rhea!" the journalist called, her words completely ignored by the younger woman who had already made her mind up and dashed for gorilla. There was a moment's pause where the Eradicator had the opportunity to hear the referee announcing Dakota's victory, but she didn't wait around, tearing down the short hall full of staff to reach her goal, rounding the corner to her way in just as a frustrated Zoey and Shayna began the trek back in.

"Getting ready to interfere in someone else's match as usual, hey?" The Submission Magician snarled, blocking Rhea's path.

The goth was caught off guard, far from expecting PFC to pack it in without trouble, unsure of how else to react to the verbal challenge except to deflect. It was old instinct, just like riding a bike. "Just wanted a better view of Zoey getting her ass kicked like the good old days."

Zoey's hands clenched, the injured woman looking every bit like she was about to swing, her words coming out through a clenched jaw, "You wanna get your licks in too? I could always adjust my schedule

to wipe that smirk off your face."

Rhea laughed, irritation already climbing its way up her chest. Her heart was hammering away, and not even her best efforts to restrain herself were really working out. Impromptu bloody brawl aside, it had been too long since she had been in the ring, letting out the aggression that had long been the devil on her shoulder. It didn't take much to spike her adrenaline, and all it would take is a single spark to ignite a fight.

In a strict one on one conflict, the Australian would've already headbutt Zoey hard enough to break her nose, consequences be damned. Instead, Rhea just stood there, staring down the smaller women with nothing but disdain. As is, they were lucky none of them had gotten suspended over the performance centre debacle - Rhea wasn't so sure she'd get off scot-free again for instigating another fight. Not a risk she could take, since if she couldn't incapacitate both women right then and there, Damage Ctrl would have lost their backup.

Really, she'd already fucked up just getting spotted by PFC.

The stare-down was broken up by the clearing of a throat, firm and a little annoyed, an irish accent cutting through the tension. "Mind if I get through to my match?" Rhea didn't need to turn around to see who was speaking, the familiarly accented voice enough of a reminder of who had been up next.

Lyra Valkyria.

The Eradicator tore her gaze away from Zoey, rolling her shoulders restlessly. "Yeah, my bad." She stepped to the side to let Lyra pass, watching in her peripheral as the other two slunk away into the back, looking far too casual and confident for Rhea's liking. They weren't upset enough for two wrestlers who had lost their title bids in short order.

As for Lyra, the woman offered Rhea a smile, overlooking the awkward tension hanging in the air as best as possible. It was hard to be on bad terms with the Valkyrie - the warmth of her demeanour forcing out something a little kinder than usual from Rhea.

"I won't say good luck, because I hope you lose," Rhea quipped dryly, "but if you were against almost anyone else, I would."

Lyra chuckled, the noise a little nervous but genuine. "Well, I'm not

going to go easy on Kairi just because she's got a scary goth lurking around. I'm kinda used to those, anyway." She turned to the curtain with a little wave, a touch too animated to be casual. It reminded Rhea of how whenever Iyo was on edge, she'd revert to speaking more through charades than her words alone. The universal language of awkward gesture.

As soon as she was gone, the worry returned in force. There was something wrong, a static tension floating through the air that preceded disaster. Call it a sixth sense for trouble, but it was the same instinct that had caused her to double back to check on Dakota and Kairi earlier in the week. Rhea had never been a thinker, really, but even putting those impulses aside, it didn't make sense. The same women who had attacked their opponents during their practice hours to try to get them to drop out wouldn't just pack it in after losing clean.

But they had seen Rhea, and knew she was standing guard outside gorilla. If they did try anything, they wouldn't come this way, and Rhea would still be an entire run-in away from intercepting them.

She had to get to ringside, and all the better if PFC didn't see her.

The Australian ducked back down the hallway and took off at a brisk pace, trying to stay inconspicuous as she picked her way through more back halls, service passageways running through the arena like veins chasing their way back to the heart of it all. She wasn't in her ring gear, but she was still more conspicuous than she'd like to cut through the crowd.

It was an asshole move, for sure, but the second she saw a crew member darting around in an appropriately baggy hoodie, she snagged him by the sleeve, yanking the poor man around. Before he had a chance to voice any protest, Rhea whipped him around the corner, shoving him against the wall to stare him down. He knew who she was, obviously, eyes widening in fear.

"Take off the sweater." she snarled out, her voice rumbling and dangerous as it came from her chest. He was quick to obey, eyes cast downwards, hands shaking a bit. Thankfully he had a matching crew t-shirt underneath, but it didn't help the slight nagging from whatever was left of her conscience. "Not a word about this to anyone."

Rhea didn't wait for the response, taking off once more, tugging the hoodie overtop of her head as she did. She still made for an

intimidating figure if anyone were to focus hard enough on her, but was unremarkable enough otherwise that with any luck, most eyes would gloss right over her presence. Just another part of the crew.

As soon as she was able to get into the lower level stands, Rhea took the quickest path to the ring that wouldn't put her in direct sight of the action, or of any cameras, circling around to come up behind the timekeeper's area. The match was already well underway, Kairi in the driver's seat despite her injuries, and Lyra was clearly feeling the pressure behind the Pirate Princess' one-armed attacks.

Just like during their recent tag bout, Kairi was moving with a fury atypical for her, as though all the frustrations she had towards Rhea were being externalized against anything that moved and breathed. Lyra, to her credit, was keeping up well enough, but there were a couple brief moments Rhea thought she could've grabbed ahold of Kairi but hesitated just enough for the older woman to dart out of reach. It didn't take a genius analyst to figure out why, the softhearted Irishwoman making a concerted effort not to touch the Pirate Princess' injured arm.

The Eradicator could almost feel her teeth cracking under the strain of the way her jaw clenched, watching the pair dance around one another with their athletic grace and skill. If Kairi wasn't so hellbent on beating the shit out of Lyra, and Lyra wasn't holding back, the two would likely be a more evenly matched pair - but as it was, Kairi was taking full opportunity to play to the audience and the camera. She may not have been in the mood to speak earlier, but she was clearly in the mood to show off. It came off as a little insulting, even, and Rhea could see the frustration beginning to build on Lyra's face.

A few moments later, Lyra rolled through one of Kairi's strikes and caught her with a sweeping leg that had the Japanese woman hitting the mat with a thump. A quick cover attempt later and the Valkyrie was in control, darting around Kairi's form with ease, focusing her strikes on the woman's legs. With every hit landed, the Japanese woman's movements became more laboured, the metaphorical wind vanishing from her sails.

Even so, her return fire was savage - pirouetting on the spot to catch Lyra across the mouth with an elbow in a sudden burst of energy, sending her reeling back into the ropes behind them, where Kairi followed up with an open palm to the same spot, sending the other woman rolling across the floor to escape, clutching at her mouth to check it for blood.

A warning from the ref was met with a sneer from Kairi, the older woman staring up at the man as though he was the one she really wanted to take out her anger on, the tension of the match boiling over for a split second. The crowd reacted in mixed confusion, torn at seeing the usual chipper Pirate Princess in such a heelish state. A low rumble erupted as the woman made for the corner, leaping down from the turnbuckle with a flying forearm to Lyra, still reeling below.

They scrapped heavily across the floor, each struggling for a position of dominance as the ref began to count. He made it to five by the time Kairi got to her feet, axe kicking Lyra across the back and sending her collapsing to the floor in a slump. The Pirate Princess didn't give her any time to recuperate, pulling the younger woman to her feet by the collar of her gear, tossing her underneath the bottom rope and climbing in after her with a single-minded determination written across her face.

A flicker of movement across the ring drew Rhea's eye, right at the edge of her periphery. To anyone not in the business, it would be easy to miss - but the Shield corner was infamous for a reason. One second, Dakota was standing there watching with trepidation, and the next, Shayna appeared as if by magic, dragging her up and over the barricades to the crowd. A surge of panic shot through the Eradicator, already sprinting. She vaulted over the divider to the timekeeper's area, right behind the announcer's desk without hesitation.

It was like deja vu, but this time, there was thought behind it. She had run through all the possibilities in her mind as she watched the match unfold - replaying their previous encounter with PFC since the very moment it had happened. Their motives, their movements, their strategies. What she could've done differently, how she could've struck differently. But now she had the added benefit of context - of knowing that no matter how frightening it was to see Shayna grab hold of Dakota, all she would do - could do - was prevent the Kiwi from coming to Kairi's aid. If she couldn't bring herself to hurt Dakota before, as hopped up on adrenaline as they'd all been, there was no way she would do so now, surrounded by the crowd who was already beginning to react to the disturbance.

Dakota would be alright. Rhea would not make the same mistake twice - spotting Zoey slipping into the ring area right as Kairi made her final ascent up the ropes to set up for a match-closing Insane Elbow. Ignorant to the trouble brewing, the roaring of the crowd mistaken for excitement as the close neared.

Rhea heard Michael Cole make an exclamation of surprise, Pat babbling right next to him at a rapid pace, their names leaving the duo's lips in disbelief as clean, controlled play-by-play went out the window. Shayna, Dakota, Rhea, Zoey, Kairi, Lyra - too many moving pieces for any unsuspecting individual to keep track of. The Eradicator evaluated it all like time stood still. Zoey was already in the corner closest to Kairi. She had always been fast, it would be a matter of seconds before she had hopped up the stairs and sprung up the ropes to grab hold of Kairi. Even at full speed, Rhea wouldn't be able to dart fully around two sides of the apron to intercept her in time.

She dove under the bottom rope into the ring, seeing the ref react to her presence like it was an out of body experience. He wheeled on her, waving his arms, saying- something. The Eradicator was focused only on Kairi, the woman's eyes widening with surprise at the interruption - then narrowing into slits of fury as the realization hit. Zoey was already halfway up the ropes behind the Pirate Princess, too close even with the shortcut for Rhea to stop. Too little, too late.

Later, Rhea would think it back and realize how it looked without Kairi knowing yet that PFC had swarmed ringside. It wasn't like Rhea would've reacted any differently if the positions were reversed. For all she knew, it seemed like Rhea was there to screw her over. It didn't matter that there was nothing for Rhea to gain from doing so. There was zero goodwill between them, and from Kairi's perspective Rhea had already taken everything else from her, why not her title opportunity as well?

That single minded hatred was the only reason at all that Zoey failed to pull Kairi off the ropes, because the second the Japanese woman locked eyes with Rhea, she was hurtling through the air to kick the Eradicator clean across the chest. The relief was so strong that Rhea barely felt it, head snapping back against the mat with a hollow thud that the conscious part of her knew would be a concussion. Above her, the lights flared, silhuoetting Zoey Stark standing vigil on the turnbuckle. There were like ten refs all crowding around, yelling gibberish at all of them. Kairi hissed a blurry stream of threats Rhea's way that may as well have been in Japanese for all she could tell, reeling her injured arm back to strike.

The hit never landed.

Lyra grabbed hold of Kairi's arm at the shoulder, tearing her off of Rhea with a snap suplex.

She didn't hear the three count, or if she did, she didn't remember it. She didn't remember anything at all.

The living room was so quiet that a pin drop would sound like a gunshot.

No one said a word, just staring at the screen as the production team tried to get the show back on track. Pearce had appeared from the back like the Grim Reaper, watching as a few useless, underpaid bodyguards carted off the women to ensure no further fighting broke out. One frazzled, terrified looking doctor led Rhea off. The camera crew was a mess, torn between cuts to showing the backstage drama, and back to the middle of the ring where Lyra stood victorious but conflicted. Commentary was no better, Pat blabbering on about the history between what was essentially the entire women's roster, as if any of it could be neatly summarized as anything except a disaster.

It wasn't until the show was over that Asuka broke the tension.

"I think I take my blessing back."

Iyo slumped over in her seat, head falling into her hands. Exasperation surged through her, followed by the familiar surge of frustration that usually preempted a temper tantrum.

It would've been tolerable if she were there, and could do anything at all to help her allies - or at least could have witnessed disaster firsthand. But an entire ocean away, all Iyo could do was breathe steadily through her fingers, willing the rage away back behind the veneer of control she presented to the world.

Damage Ctrl needs to change.

That singular thought had taunted her for months in the wake of failure. Consumed by the question of what had gone wrong. Weeks after weeks of losses, after so many months of being unshakable at the top of it all. Conflict emerging from nowhere, enemies from the shadows who still stalked them even now, like they were victims instead of recently fallen champions. Injuries stacking up. And then, silent fractures appearing in the foundation of it all, threatening to tear them apart.

Iyo had thought she had the answers. To bridge the gaps between them and the rest of the roster, mending fences and climbing the mountain once more in tandem. They had changed, so she thought. But perhaps, with the image of Kairi, embittered and distrustful burned into her retinas - not all of them had. She had been pasting over the wounds between herself and her best friend for the past decade, and now that veneer had been torn away by the presence of someone too brash and reckless to know she was handling cracked glass.

It wasn't Rhea's fault anymore. It was Iyo's.

Iyo's fault for expecting them to be able to put aside their issues for her own selfish reasons. A part of her had still believed she could have it both ways, and that Damage Ctrl's future and her own personal feelings towards Rhea were somehow compatible. But the older she got, the more the Japanese woman was beginning to realize that victory could only come with sacrifice.

But what was she willing to lose?

"Don't go there, Iyo." Mio spoke. Asuka's hand was clasped between hers, the Empress' face disapproving, though she stayed silent. "You can't think your way out of this."

Emotions felt dangerous when it came to any issues of import. As reckless and impulsive as Iyo could appear, it was never without a level of rationality. Weighed risk versus reward, even when such decisions happened in a fraction of a second. Her reputation for reckless, jaw-dropping spectacle was a product of just that. Never without danger, but always with a sense of carefully evaluated purpose.

She never just did what she wanted. Or, she hadn't until recently. This entire detour had been a product of that impulse, after all.

"Nee-san... what else can I do?" Iyo asked quietly. It was rare she asked Mio for guidance anymore, their lives having diverged too heavily to truly relate to one another anymore. But if there was one thing she did know, it was how to navigate working with, and against, those she cherished. And, at times, losing them.

Asuka cut in, offering her brusque opinion without hesitation. "Why do you even need to question it? Kairi's practically family." Her entire demeanour was couched in disbelief, breaking away from Mio to gesture dramatically at the TV screen, now playing commercials for a

probiotic yogurt. All the playfulness was gone, replaced with the fierce protectiveness of a woman who had embraced Kairi as a sister years ago.

They had stood together for years, while Iyo had been the third wheel almost a world apart. While Kairi had ultimately returned for Iyo, it hadn't been long before bringing Asuka in was necessary - because truthfully, the Kabuki Warriors' bond went beyond history, and an ancient one-sided romantic pursuit. They understood each other inside and out, seeing the world as though through one another's eyes.

The Empress of Tomorrow had seen victory within reach, hoping and yearning for a chance to finally achieve something on her own, as though it were her.

What she didn't see was that crystal clear moment where the question was, victory at what cost? Kairi's safety, or the potential for triumph? But Iyo had seen it, had narrowed in on that single moment some would call instinct, and came to the very same conclusion Rhea had. There was a part of Iyo that wondered if the Eradicator had known what she would've chosen in her place.

Mio shook her head, grasping Asuka's shoulder gently. "This isn't about Rhea anymore." She addressed her wife first before returning to the point of her sister's concerns. As frustrated as Asuka appeared, she stayed quiet. "You need to choose what matters most to you. Not who. Actions. Directions. Feelings. Not people."

The woman had a knack for seeing right to the core of issues. The only problem was that it was still an impossible answer to find. How to choose, when her mind would not stop racing, and Asuka's critical words stuck in her chest like a knife. Once upon a time, her answer would have been that foolish, unfulfilled love. To grovel at the feet of someone who would forgive her, but not understand her. To tape over the cracks and pretend it was okay to keep on. To bend to another's will.

Iyo stood, Mio meeting her halfway to wrap her in a hug without any hesitation. The tears came instantly, but so too did the answer. "I need to go home."

Chapter 6: control

Chapter Notes

> i had to go back and make some of this fluffier to compensate for our current real-world rhiyo angst. sorry. the homosexuality will continue until morale improves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Concussions were a bitch. It didn’t immediately seem like the worst Rhea ever had, but it was close - and certainly the most frustrating. She didn't remember much after that first feeling of Kairi's boot against her sternum, the bruise aching with every shift of her body. All for the best, because it left her with a degree of plausible deniability. She didn't remember if she'd already apologized to Kairi and Dakota, so she didn't reach out at risk of repeating herself. Better for that particular wound to scar over untouched than be ripped open while healing.

There were bouquets scattered around her office that duplicated over time, maybe from other wrestlers, but more likely from staff. Most were missing cards, so Rhea had no way of knowing. The only one she set apart from the others was from Cathy, her handwriting scribbled on the tag reading, *"Take better care of yourself. The rest will come."*

It had taken her a while to even work through reading it. Physically, she could see fine, but everything got jumbled by the time it made its way to her brain. That particular symptom was quickly improving, but reading still made her exceptionally tired now that she was on the mend. The doctors had said what they always said. Limit exercise to light, necessary activity at first, keep screen time and reading to a minimum, rest up, and once the symptoms start to abate, progress slowly so as not to re-aggravate them.

Basically, she couldn't do anything she normally would, including fulfilling her scheduled house show matches alongside Bianca and Naomi. So much for tag practice. Priest had driven her home over the course of the night, picking up enough take-out to get her through the week, but he was headed back onto the road for the remainder of the holiday tour. In his place, he left menacing silence and the phone Rhea shouldn't look at, but couldn't keep herself from.

weird japanese girl □

dont k ill me

I won't.

i suck so bad

You don't.

That had been it until Iyo sent a voice memo a minute later, ordering her to put the phone down in the scariest tone Rhea had been subject to since their NXT days, back when the Japanese woman was still regularly throwing hands against her. Memories were foggy, but Rhea still remembered how much Iyo's shote stung, and that was the most forgiving weapon in her arsenal.

Rhea had listened, both because she was secretly terrified of Iyo, and also because she genuinely believed the woman must be at her wit's end with her. Not even twenty-four hours after Iyo had warned Rhea not to do something reckless, she went and got a concussion and cost Kairi a spot in the finals.

It was bad, to put it mildly.

The Australian didn't want to imagine what the Damage Ctrl group chat would look like. But the situation wouldn't leave her weary, battered brain - so despite Iyo's singular command, Rhea kept her phone close at hand. Just in case.

But waiting felt like torture.

So she slept.

When she woke the next morning, there was another text from Iyo, the words kept changing into new messages every time Rhea looked at it. Eventually, she stopped trying.

Aside from that, there was nothing at all to grasp Rhea's attention. Nothing for her to look forward to, just the empty, cold march of time.

So she slept.

The TV was too loud and garish even on its quietest setting, even after Rhea draped a sheet over it to further dampen the sound and the brightness. She drew all the blinds. The doctor called to ask if Rhea was having any headaches or migraines. She said no.

The world didn't hurt, it just was too much.

So she slept.

By Thursday evening, home felt like a prison. Most weeks, Rhea would've been enthused to have this much time to just relax without worrying about meetings or insane holiday road show schedules. When her brain worked long enough to navigate social media, she hunted down clips of the tour, watching Liv drop kick Naomi on loop, then Priest fling Dom across the ring, and then someone with crimson hair fly through the air - Alba? But her brain kept swirling around, inserting herself into matches she wasn't in, imagining what she could do, and how Iyo could follow up - just to keep some sense of battle-readiness.

Everything had been tidied up by Friday morning, her dogs were loving all the attention, and Rhea had caught up on all the music releases that she hadn't had time to sit down and appreciate the way she should. She scrolled instagram, seeing photos of Iyo smiling in Japan in front of moonlit rivers and star-speckled mountaintops. Happier than she'd seemed in weeks. It was like a wish fulfilled via monkey's paw - everything Rhea had asked for, delivered in the worst possible means.

Her gut felt tense. Rhea couldn't remember the last time she ate, or what she had, but she felt like if she had anything at all, she'd just throw it right back up in stress.

And so again, she slept.

“Have you heard from Iyo?” Dakota was asking Rhea, form nebulous in her dream-state. One second, her face was framed by lighter blonde locks - the next, her form shifted, purple streaks appearing from nowhere only to vanish again into swathes of pink. Everything else was dark and muddled, like Rhea’s brain wasn’t capable of making anything else take shape at all.

She wasn’t sure whether this Dakota wanted to know about real existence or about the *other* dream she had just torn Rhea from. But even in an unconscious state, she wasn’t keen on talking about what that particular section of her psyche had done to her.

“She wished me a happy New Year. Yesterday? The day before? I don’t know.” Time was already fucking with Rhea, and dream time didn’t help the matter. She felt like she was stuck in a loop.

“This morning,” Dakota corrected, her hair half-silver now. “It’s still Tuesday.”

Rhea’s brain ground to a halt, doubling back on itself over and over to be sure that had really been what the Kiwi had said. No way she had, and if she did, it didn’t make any sense. Sure, dreams were baffling at the best of times, but impossible that it hadn’t even been 24 hours since Rhea got her brain rattled on the ground. What about all of the cleaning she had done? She had organized her entire record collection and dusted all her taxidermy displays. Hadn’t she?

Or Dakota was lying to her, as dream-nightmare hybrids were wont to do.

“Fuck off,” Rhea said, full of venom.

Dakota sighed. “True shit, sorry. But that’s good, neither her or Asuka has responded to anything in the group chat since Kairi threatened to move out.”

Oh great, so her subconscious was torturing her with answers to questions the waking Rhea had about Iyo. Nothing to be trusted, and things to misremember as fact once she was awake again. “And they were roommates,” her brain supplanted, eloquent as a typical yankee. “Why am I such a bloody homewrecker? Should just go back to sulking around alone, everyone was happier when I was.” Rhea punched into the darkness of the void around her in frustration, jerking back her fist when it collided with something solid and heavy.

“Chill, dude. That’s not even fucking true, Iyo was pretty damn

miserable til you started showing up.” Dream Dakota’s hair had finally settled into the short, bright fuchsia that had been her signature throughout most of her NXT tenure. Everything else had started to take shape around Rhea, too, taking the form of her bedroom. For some reason, Dakota was still disembodied, floating around like she was superimposed across the ceiling, pulsing in time with the pain in Rhea’s hand.

“You’re not real, you have to say that to keep me deluded enough to keep screwing this up,” Rhea spat. Dream-her was flat on her back, vulnerable. She pushed herself upright, vertigo hitting her instantly. Her empty stomach gurgled. She'd never felt hungry in her sleep before, but she again couldn't remember having touched a single thing Damian had filled her fridge with over the course of days. She didn't even remember having walked into her kitchen, or taking a trip to the bathroom.

The bed beside her lurched as one of her dogs jumped off it.

"Rhea?" Dakota questioned, her form disappearing like smoke, but voice still clear in her ear- only one. Rhea craned her neck to the side, phone falling from her hand. The clock on her bedside table read 5pm. The Kiwi's voice, faint, called through the speaker. "Dude, I think I'm gonna let the PC doc know they need to check on you."

Rhea snatched up her phone like lightning. "Don't." Her mouth felt like a desert, re-opening her messages to stare at the most recent. Iyo's still right there at the top.

weird japanese girl □

Happy New Year 🎇□

i missy ou

thingswere better when you were here

No they weren't. But I miss you too 🩶

I'll be back soon.

Don't sleep too much. It will make it worse.

Rhea?

😶‍🌫️

If you don't respond in half an hour I'm calling someone.

The last one was from twenty minutes ago. Rhea stared at the still ticking call time with Dakota, twelve minutes on.

"Rhea?" Dakota repeated. *Fuck,* were Damage Ctrl ever needy.

"I'm fine. I was lucid dreaming or some shit. I'm awake now, Iyo texted me so much while I was out. She's gonna kill me for falling asleep." The world was re-orienting herself around the new reality she was subject to. Perhaps exactly none of those things she recalled had happened at all, but she was awake now and, while a little dizzy, things made sense. She just needed to convince everyone else of that. "I promise I'm functional, I'll catch an Uber or something tomorrow morning to get checked out again. Good enough?"

The Kiwi's hesitant silence felt dubious at best, but she reneged. "Text me regular updates. You're so damn stressful."

For fuck's sake. The last thing Rhea had wanted was to take up any more attention, but here she was, making more drama. "Yeah, I'll hit up the chat with you and Iyo if you'll both chill out. Which, speaking of!" The Australian segued, eager to get out of the conversation.

"Alright," Dakota sighed. "Stay safe, dude, love you."

Gross. Actual human affection, while her brain was vulnerable enough to entertain saying it back. Seemed like all of her one on one conversations with Dakota took place lately in the most pathetic circumstances known to man. Rhea's brain scrambled to find something to say, but nothing came to her lips. Nothing that would be appropriate. No, not nothing. One word, awkward as all hell.

"Ditto."

Rhea hung up in a panic right after, before she could question if that was how friends interacted. She'd have to ask Cathy what her personal vibe with Dakota was like, because there was no way in hell she was going to ask Iyo if she'd ever told the Kiwi she loved her. That would've been too weird a conversation even without the potential of opening up the floodgates to that kind of affection with Iyo. While Rhea could kind of grin and bear it with Dakota, she was pretty sure if Iyo ever did the same to her, she'd end up fleeing back to Australia, never to return.

Rhea's fingers hovered over the keypad, hesitating to text the Japanese

woman back. There were a lot of potential missteps she could make, and considering she had already embarrassed herself pretty heavily with those sappy previous texts, she decided to keep things truthful and succinct.

Sorry. You're right, fell asleep and it was hell. Feel like I've lived this week ten times over already

Stupid □

Eat something □□

Predictably, Rhea had not in fact touched any food in her delirium - meaning she hadn't eaten anything since before the previous night's show. For how hungry she was, picking her way through food was a miserable experience, since every taste and texture felt strangely emphasized just as light and sound were. Still, she managed to scarf down a full meal over the course of the evening.

More importantly, she took her dogs out for a brief walk around the neighbourhood. They may have been more than happy to just run around the fenced yard, doggy door giving them free reign even in her absence - and her dog walker must have still dropped in mid-day to see to it they got some exercise - but the routine was a much-needed comfort. It made everything feel more grounded, helping Rhea work through the jumble of emotions she had.

She hadn't been gone for long. Maybe half an hour at max, the sun barely starting to sink down the horizon when she made her way back. Yet she returned to a shiny silver hybrid in the driveway that certainly hadn't been there when she had left. Her dogs reacted first, noses pointed up at the porch, tugging eagerly on their leashes and wagging their tails excitedly at the prospect of a visitor. One that, though they hadn't ever directly met, they certainly recognized the smell of to some extent.

"Iyo?"

There was a significant part of Rhea that questioned whether she was still entirely tripping. It hadn't been long, after all, since Rhea had escaped from her Groundhog Day phantasmagoria - but while she

hadn't exactly minded Dakota's presence, if it *was* a weird hallucination superimposing itself on her psyche, Iyo was certainly the more welcome figure.

Real or not, her dogs were going mental, and Rhea didn't know exactly how comfortable the smaller woman was with larger breeds, so she quickly herded them down the side path to her backyard, wrangling them past the gate to run amok while she dealt with her unexpected guest. When she turned around, Iyo was still sitting there patiently, looking a bit like a stray to be adopted herself.

The Australian just stared at Iyo dumbly. Seeing the woman casually sitting on her porch in baggy jeans and a t-shirt was surreal. It was Tuesday. Dakota, real human being Dakota, had said so herself. Despite how long the last day had felt, it had been practically no time at all. Nothing made a lick of sense, Iyo wasn't due back for days. "Am I fuckin' losing it? It's not the fifth yet, is it?"

"Hi Rhea," the Japanese woman said, the sound of her voice soft and hesitant. Unusual for Iyo, but then, so was materializing from seemingly thin air at Rhea's house, where the smaller woman had never set foot before, when she should still be an entire ocean away. She stood from the steps, stretching herself out with a soft groan that could only be the result of a long, uncomfortable flight. "No. I get to do New Years twice. Had the first in the sky." She spoke slowly, as though carefully evaluating the other woman for a reaction. The faint beginnings of a smile that had been playing across her lips when she first looked up faded as she realized Rhea was still utterly motionless.

Rhea was struggling to do the math in her head. In theory, she knew the time difference like the back of her hand, because it was nearly identical to Adelaide, but with a flight nearly half the length. She kept getting stuck there though - fourteen hours, give or take, minus fourteen for the time change itself - fuck, what was that ridiculous thing Hogan said once about wrestling four hundred days in a year? It wasn't like Iyo had actually teleported instantaneously, but it felt that way. Why, she couldn't fathom.

No words would form, and Rhea humiliatingly felt a pressure start to build behind her eyes. Try as she might to fight it back, it seemed Iyo could see right through her, because the second the beginnings of moisture started to blur her vision, the Japanese woman bounded down the steps just as quickly as she crossed a ring, arms flinging wide to catch Rhea in an embrace.

"I don't know why I'm..." Rhea started to mumble, feeling like a child.

"Brain damage," Iyo deadpanned, expression utterly serious. While Iyo had certainly seen many other concussions before, Rhea wasn't certain whether the older woman had ever seen *her* concussed - if she had, certainly not so severely. Yet she had a complete read on the situation. It was as embarrassing as it was comforting. "Why are you alone?"

Rhea shrugged, because there was no actual answer to that. She didn't have a tonne of friends, and the ones she did were on the road. There wasn't anyone else she could trouble. Besides, it was just a concussion. Not a big deal.

She must have said at least some of that aloud, because Iyo glared, making a frustrated sound deep in her throat. Even so, her hand trailed over Rhea's cheek, brushing away one of the errant tears that had managed to fall despite her best efforts. The Australian tried to turn away, ashamed, only for the other woman's grip to tighten, keeping Rhea's gaze locked to hers.

"It is always *a big deal*." Her voice was a harsh whisper, laced with a protectiveness that was totally foreign.

Rhea nodded, just enough for Iyo to know that she understood. That she wasn't fighting, but couldn't quite make her tongue shape the words to convey anything except disbelief and inappropriate emotion. The Japanese woman sighed, releasing her grip on the other woman's jaw, hands falling back to her sides. It was like the touch was some kind of circuit breaker that kept Rhea from remembering what to say, and once she had been released, words came rushing back.

"Why are you here?" Rhea blurted, only to wince as the words sounded a little harsher than she intended. "I mean-"

The Japanese woman cut her off. Brusque, but not offended. "I was worried about you."

Guilt flooded in over ruining Iyo's holiday, secondary only to a singular thought. The worry that had been circling her brain for what felt like ages already, unspoken, and had been harshly dragged to the surface by Dakota’s mention of the Damage Ctrl group chat earlier. There was no elegant way to ask what she needed to, so Rhea fought instead to make her tone as gentle as possible. "Where are you staying?"

She hated herself the moment the words left her lips. The Japanese

woman's brows furrowed in a momentary flash of pain. Familiar - haunted in the way that Rhea had felt for months after the Judgment Day's betrayal of her, when she felt scorned by everyone, abandoned to wander alone. Alone, save for one friend who kept her head above water, and another who had appeared out of the ether after years of distance, and was standing before her now.

"A hotel, maybe," Iyo said. She shrugged, the movement tense, her voice growing quieter. "I want Kairi to feel safe." The way she said it, small and regretful, conveyed perfectly just how hurt she truly felt over the thought that her presence could make Kairi feel anything but. To Rhea, it was ridiculous - their issues were between Kairi and Rhea, Iyo had done nothing worth condemning except for being by her side. If friendship was guilt, then god help them all, because the younger woman couldn't let Iyo suffer alone.

"Would you stay over? If you think I should have someone around to make sure I'm good, that'd be the best way to do it anyway, y'know? A win-win," the Australian rambled, mouth dry at the prospect of sharing her home with someone else - not just someone, but Iyo. Though she'd had time to consider the possibility over the last weeks, it remained an unspoken hypothetical. But now there Iyo was. Terrifying as a viper, just as small, brightly coloured, and nearly as dangerous, yet so strangely tempting to reach out for. Rhea had never had great risk assessment.

"I would like that," Iyo murmured, a little sad, but hopeful underneath it all. "Is it trouble?"

Rhea shrugged. "Nah. I got a spare room set up, just a little dusty. You gonna be cool with the dogs?" The Japanese woman smiled at her, and Rhea felt yet again that she was forgetting how to stay on-guard.

"They will like me." She sounded certain of it. "I am good with animals."

Iyo hadn't been wrong. She couldn't lie, dogs weren't her favourite animals - she was trying not to think about what she would do about the little stray cat she had rescued last year with Kairi - but their frantic, dorky energy was a welcome distraction from the chaos of life. In some ways, they reminded Iyo of Rhea. The same wild, protective

streak, intimidating in stature but tempered by the same absurd joy at the smallest scrap of affection.

And they were clingy, refusing to leave her side for long.

Rhea's home was surprisingly large considering the other woman lived entirely alone. While a good portion of the floorplan was taken up by her garage-turned-gym and the adjacent living room that was set up as a home theatre, the kitchen and dining area were a comfortable size, albeit unused-looking. Iyo soon learned there were technically three guest rooms - one converted into an office, and another acting as storage for all of Rhea's gear. She wasn't sure whether that had always been the case, and wondered if Rhea had lived with Dom prior to their breakup, but didn't want to open any wounds by asking too many questions.

While nice, it seemed lonely in comparison to Iyo's shared apartment. If not for the dogs, it seemed like it would feel lifeless.

It had taken some convincing for Rhea to let Iyo tote her own luggage up to the spare room, but the Australian eventually relented when the shorter woman pointed out she shouldn't be lifting anything yet based on her concussion protocol. That, and the combination of firmly tugging on Rhea's wrist, glaring, and then smiling sweetly that Iyo had discovered was a surefire way of getting anything she needed out of the goth.

Once Iyo had settled in and neither of the women had a task to occupy them, it did get somewhat awkward. While on some level they'd been friends for years, not having any kind of schedule to keep to or reason to hang around one another made it difficult to find a starting point to build off of.

Inevitably, with jet lag keeping her from being able to sleep anytime soon, Iyo gravitated back downstairs, hoping perhaps to grab a drink of water before retiring to the guest room to read - but spotting a full rack of dishes set aside to dry, the woman was immediately struck with the urge to take care of the chore. It was menial work, not particularly exciting - and since Iyo wasn't familiar with how the cabinets were organized, a bit tedious. Yet she found herself oddly calm and comforted by it, feeling a bit more at home in a space she had only spent a couple of hours in thus far.

In the process of putting away the last set of dishes, Iyo felt suddenly aware of the presence of another human - Rhea staring at her from the

doorway to the kitchen. Her gaze felt accusatory, but there was something under it that was hard for Iyo to put her finger on, so she put on her best guilty smile, raising her hands in mock surrender. One of the dogs - the smallest of the three - immediately abandoned Iyo to run to her owner's side.

"You're a shit guest," the taller woman said, shaking her head, but there was a ghost of a grin on her face as she stepped further into the room, moving to the pantry to grab a bag of chips out - blue. Whatever flavour blue was. "Can't sleep either?"

Iyo shook her head, taking a self-conscious sip from the glass of water she had come down for half an hour prior. "Jet lag is a bitch," she pronounced carefully, stressing out the curse dramatically.

It had the intended effect, Rhea snorting in amusement. "Yeah, nah, me neither. Gonna watch a movie?" The lilt at the end of her sentence indicated a question, even though it wasn't phrased like it. The Australian had that tendency sometimes, one she shared with Dakota where she would imply things without being straightforward about it - but where Dakota's voice would pitch up, Rhea's trailed down, fading off almost as if there could be more words to follow, even when there weren't.

While it seemed presumptuous for Iyo to assume that it was a suggestion that the two of them hang out together, the way Rhea was still watching her closely indicated otherwise. "Is it the clown one?"

The genuine smile that lit the younger woman's face was heartrendingly pretty. Rhea was like a giant golden retriever sometimes. One dunked in black hair dye perhaps, but like an overgrown puppy nonetheless. "Terrifier. Yeah, you remember." Her rare excitement was palpable, so despite all of Iyo's reservations about watching a movie with so much gore, she couldn't help but smile back fondly.

"I'm in," she said, and followed Rhea to the couch, feeling for all the world that it was the biggest step forward they had made in a while, despite the fact she had been sorting through Rhea's dishes not ten minutes prior. They sat a comfortable distance apart, dogs scattered around the space, with Rhea wrapped up in a blanket - one that she offered to Iyo, but was refused, the Japanese woman much more used to cool nights than the Australian was.

Iyo was grateful she had a bit of a buffer zone when the first

jumpscare came, predictably catching her off-guard.

The film itself wasn't particularly terrifying despite the name, not in the way a psychological horror would be - but it had a fair number of disturbing moments and, of course, plenty of gratuitous blood splatter and body trauma. While it was well-known that Rhea was a nut for the macabre, it wasn't until now that Iyo really witnessed that trait in action. The other woman was engrossed, but in an entirely different way than Iyo - Rhea was enthralled, lurching in excitement with every kill, at the same moment that Iyo would jerk in disgust.

It didn't take long for Rhea to notice the little tremble of revulsion and the way that Iyo's hands would twitch towards her eyes as if she was about to shield her vision, but inevitably was too curious not to watch the full scene. "You okay, mate? We can turn it off."

Iyo's eyes flickered towards Rhea's face, the light of the screen reflecting back in her irises. The taller woman had the remote in her hand, finger poised to pause it.

If it was anyone else, she would have let them, and just gone to bed - tossing and turning as the gory scenes replayed themselves across her eyelids. But it wasn't anyone, it was Rhea, and this was important to her. For reasons Iyo didn't understand, but didn't have to.

Instead, she shifted down the couch, the half a foot of distance between them suddenly feeling far too much. "Don't. Can I...?" Iyo gestured, not quite touching, her hand hovering near the other woman's shoulder, right at the edge of the blanket. Rhea looked puzzled for a moment, then her brows rose in comprehension, arm lifting up to allow the other woman access. Iyo wasted no time sliding right underneath her arm, curling herself into Rhea's side comfortably.

As Rhea's arm slowly wrapped around her shoulders, Iyo sighed, tension exiting her body even as Art the Clown appeared on screen once more.

"You know you don't have to like this just because I do, Iyo." The words rumbled through her, the Japanese woman close enough now that she could feel the vibrations of the taller woman's speech as well as hear it. On screen, Art was up to no good, but it just made Iyo press into Rhea all the closer.

"I did not say I like it," she said, looking up at the other woman from the safety of their embrace. Rhea avoided looking back, her eyes fixed to the screen. She did this often, avoiding Iyo's direct attention in

moments of vulnerability - or when Iyo's gaze lingered too long on her. Making the Australian nervous was never her intention, but sometimes an unintended side effect of her straightforward, sincere demeanour compared to Rhea's own sarcastic, aloof one. Iyo was always curious about how much they could adapt to one another. Compromises had to be made at some point in any partnership - their past failed tag team histories with people that could not, or would not blend together was evidence of that. "Would you eat octopus?"

Rhea was unruffled by the nonsequitur, already tracing back the Japanese woman's line of thought to NXT, and the awkward couple of months spent tagging with Zoey Stark after Rhea had departed the brand. She huffed out a laugh, eyes still fixed to the screen as Art began to saw a woman in half. Iyo flinched and burrowed herself closer, pressing her face against the taller woman's shoulder to muffle out the noise. The faint smell of cinnamon wafting off of Rhea was enough to ground herself, but barely. Though she couldn't see what was going on anymore, she was all too aware of the sounds the TV was emitting.

"Course," the Australian agreed, fingers carding through Iyo's long locks, absentmindedly combing them out. The gesture felt natural, but as she realized it, her hand froze mid-motion, then pulled away, settling back on Iyo's shoulder like she had never moved at all. She cleared her throat, rambling on, "I'd eat anything you asked me to." A beat, before Rhea hissed in a breath. "Shit - I mean - I've had octopus before. It's not a big deal."

Her expression was so uncharacteristically embarrassed that Iyo had to laugh, despite her discomfort. "You're a dork," the smaller woman teased, patting Rhea on the cheek affectionately.

"Fuck off, my brain's still not working worth a shit," Rhea grumbled half-heartedly, before nudging Iyo's elbow lightly. "I promised Dakota I would go see the doc tomorrow. I'm feeling better but..." The Eradicator's voice dropped off in that low, swooping, questioning way again - this time as though she was self-conscious.

"You should, yes," Iyo said, not quite certain what exactly the other woman was asking of her, just that she was petitioning something. She was quiet for a moment, thinking about it - pulling back far enough to capture Rhea's full expression in her line of sight, hands folded in her lap as she waited for further clarification. The movie continued on in front of them, momentarily forgotten. Rhea stared back like she was expecting Iyo to say more, her eyes flicking from Iyo's face to the TV

screen, then back to her again.

"I... shouldn't drive like this, right?" she said eventually.

"Ah," Iyo responded, a little caught off-guard by not having thought of the logistics. When Rhea had asked her to stay over, she had just assumed Rhea was asking for emotional support. But of course, there was a need for more than just simple companionship. "So... I am your ride or die. Okay!" Her tone was teasing, and the Australian snorted at the bad pun. Iyo beamed, proud of being able to throw together a joke in English.

The taller woman's expression was hard to pin down. There was an obvious fondness, and something else that was a little harder to identify - ardent under it all. "Good. Sushi after?"

Iyo yipped in glee, momentarily putting aside any wish to figure out what went on in Rhea's head to instead celebrate that, while her octopus question had been a pure hypothetical question based in old bitterness, she had been taken completely seriously. Despite all the ways Rhea had tried to indicate so far that she was serious about them as a team, that was one that really hit hard for her, crashing back into Rhea with an enthusiastic, affectionate fury.

Before she could think about it, her arms were thrown around Rhea's neck, pulling the taller woman down towards her to press an excitable kiss to her cheek. The moment she did, Iyo could feel Rhea freeze up under her touch, as if every muscle was held rigid, her hand on Iyo's shoulder like a claw. The smaller woman pulled away sheepishly, realizing the younger woman's personal space boundaries probably did not extend so far. "Sorry, I-"

"It's cool, man," Rhea interrupted, though she suddenly didn't seem to know what to do with her hands, reaching up to rub self-consciously at her face with a thumb. The quiet was a chasm between them, awkwardness seeping into Iyo as she began to second guess where their comfort level with each other truly was. There had been no thought of her private feelings for Rhea in that kiss - it was a simple gesture of excitement that she would've shared with Kairi or Dakota as well - but maybe she had pushed the Australian's personal boundaries a little too hard.

They were saved from any more tense silence by the sudden booming of fireworks. Two of the dogs went up in a barking fit, running through the room and up the stairs, while Rhea's oldest remained,

curled at his master's feet, grumbling softly in discontent. Iyo got to her feet, turning to see bursts of light in the darkened window - red, blue, gold, green, and every other colour she could imagine, sparks trailing through the sky.

It was odd, living through this twice in one day. Not that there had been any real festivities in the air, certainly no fireworks or anything beyond a complimentary drink onboard the flight. It had felt more like just another night on the plane - but now it seemed Rhea wasn't the only one who had lived through her own Groundhog Day of sorts. A bittersweet feeling tugged at Iyo's chest as she watched the lights burst and fade.

A year ago she and Rhea had both been in such different positions in life - both champions, both surrounded by factions that looked to them for guidance and leadership, and yet now, here they were together. A consolation prize in some aspects, but when Iyo thought about it, she realized that it wasn't anything of the sort to her. A part of her was afraid that the next year would see her lose this, too, that the cycle would repeat all over again. But she was determined to fight to the bitter end this time.

"Happy New Year," Rhea murmured, standing behind Iyo and placing a gentle hand at the base of her back, looking at their reflections in the window as bursts of colour danced behind it. "Let's just call that a premature celebration." She joked, a half-smirk tugging at her lips.

At least this year, Iyo knew without a doubt what her resolution was.

"It's fairly last minute, but we can have the rights sorted by Monday," the too-chirpy marketing lady - Susan, fittingly enough - assured. "Queenslayer is a fine name, I would've gone with something a little less brash, but it fits the attitude one of you projects, I suppose." She aimed that barbed comment at Rhea, who could only snort wryly in response.

Sure, *she* was the Queenslayer - Rhea had to wonder if all of Iyo's Queens' Quest years were entirely lost on these people, or if they even bothered to learn a single thing about their wrestlers outside of the WWE itself. That bit should have screamed Iyo to a T, but here they were, getting their brain cells killed off slowly by meetings about all

the shit she and the joshi had already decided between one another. As if they needed a business major's stamp of approval to know what would work.

Unfortunately, after a thorough check up by the doctor yesterday, he had confirmed despite Rhea's worrying initial symptoms, she was healing up appropriately, so there was no way to try to postpone these sorts of meetings any further.

Just like the last time Iyo had gotten stuck in one of these meeting rooms, she looked entirely overwhelmed by the whole situation. Her brows were furrowed, a pen tapping out an uneven rhythm on the table as the rest of the room buzzed around them.

"Now when it comes to gear... your aesthetics just don't work as-is. Rhea, we love the edge and don't want to change a thing, especially with the tough vibe being pitched here. Iyo, on the other hand... we really want to see you in something a little grungier. More like your presentation you had tapped into after losing your world title. Black leather, less skin, not as flashy." Rhea winced at that - she knew well enough that particular change had come at an emotional low point for the woman. It wasn't what she preferred at all, she had just been too harrowed by the loss to put in any energy into anything else. She still looked cool as hell, but Rhea much preferred seeing Iyo's colourful, expressive outfits that reflected her genuine passion and joy in her work.

That, too, had been discussed, and frankly Rhea didn't care what they had to say on the matter. "Not happening. We'll shift palette, but that's as good as you're getting. We both already use purple and red enough, I'll throw some more white in the mix."

Susan seemed aghast. Her offense at being disregarded immediately sharpened into barbed condescension, her words pointed. "If your gear, the silhouettes and all stay similar to what it's been, it gives off the impression that this is just a side path for a couple of solo acts who can't hack it on their own. That may be true, but we can't let the fans think that." It was sharp, a reality check that neither woman had been prepared for. They were used to being top dogs in the division, and this was a brutal reminder that, while still respected names, their reputations had become more than a little battered behind the scenes. How much of that was their actual failures, or just the fact that Rhea was now firmly in the 'unmanageable' category, she didn't know.

Nonetheless she bristled, eyes flashing in rage as the other woman

spoke so dismissively, the growing urge to deck anyone at all building with every word that left the woman's mouth. Rhea itched to fight, though their next match loomed seemingly an age away. The need to defend Iyo's honour, and her own, was building. It didn't take much at all for Rhea to be on the verge of lashing out, and Susan's smug little smirk indicated she knew it.

Before the Australian could stand and make a scene, Iyo's fingers brushed her thigh under the table, her other hand raised to interrupt the tirade. "Rhea is dying her hair." Her Japanese accent was pronounced in the way it often was when she was tired, emotional, or both.

Susan twisted her mouth into a thoughtful frown, caught clearly off guard by that particular offer. "I'm listening. Go on, how exactly?" Her tone had grown more neutral, more business-like.

Rhea sighed. That bit of discussion actually hadn't taken too long in comparison to everything else - including getting Iyo to stop suggesting mascots, which as far as either of them knew, had absolutely zero chance of being approved regardless of how stubbornly the smaller woman had stuck on the topic.

The Australian leaned towards Iyo, grabbing a section of her long hair to loosely drape next to her own face. "Red streak. Just a couple near the front, yin and yang. Easy." She let go of the woman's hair and sat up straight again, as though daring Susan to offer up another snarky challenge.

"Oh. Well, yes, that would work." The woman seemed more than a little put out at not being able to find anything to argue about. "You'll have it done this week?" Rhea nodded. The marketing rep seemed to be running out of ways to drag the conversation out further, rifling through the papers. "Well then, great. That's all the notes I had - you two should be set to have a package air on Monday. Either pre-filmed if Rhea's unable to travel by then, or on-site if possible to announce a rematch with the Judgment Day. You'll hear from the promotional team on details for that - but as far as I'm concerned, by the time Rhea's hair is done, you two can start teasing on socials."

As soon as they were out the office door, Rhea groaned loudly, running a hand through her hair in frustration. "Fucking corporate bullshit, goddamn, stupid fuckin' crock of shit," she growled. "What was the bloody point of any of that?" They could've accomplished the same amount in a ten-minute phone call.

"Patience training," Iyo quipped dryly. Rhea turned to her, brows furrowed, only to be greeted by the Japanese woman's shit eating grin. It was all she could do to bite her tongue, rolling her eyes instead of lashing out with something she'd regret. The smaller woman's amusement faded into a serious frown, seeing how her usual playful quip hadn't quite hit. "Rhea. Are you okay?"

"Never better," the Eradicator snarled. It wasn't aimed at the other woman, but it was still sharp. Iyo was unbothered, expression unchanged. Sometimes her calm demeanor really had a way of getting under Rhea's skin. Not that it was her fault Rhea was irritated, but the fact she'd just patiently wait there while Rhea stewed through her more unpleasant emotions was frustrating. She'd rather just be called on her shit, blow up and be blown up on in turn, rather than have someone look at her like they understood.

The other woman seemed to sense the shift, her voice a low, firm whisper. "Don't. Don't do that to me."

"Do what?" Rhea's eyes flashed in challenge. It was an empty deflection - she knew exactly what Iyo was referring to. If Iyo hadn't been Rhea's ride, she would've already stormed off to sulk on her own. That was another frustrating aspect of how this dynamic was forming - Rhea felt oddly owned, not by Iyo, but by the obligations that surrounded their circumstances. She owed the older woman for having fucked so much up already, and for taking care of her now, and even if she didn't, their employer certainly expected something out of them.

Ultimately, Rhea had trouble coping with the weight of that.

"Don't push me away," the woman's voice was soft, nearly lost to the background noise of people coming and going through the corridor.

Guilt bubbled up inside her, and the taller woman's face crumpled. "It's not you - I'm just completely useless right now. It's been like, two weeks since my last match, and it's going to be more before my next. I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing when I don't have that."

Iyo cautiously crept closer, like approaching a wild animal. "We can try light training, if you feel okay?" The older woman's voice was so careful, so hesitant. The same way people tiptoed around Rhea whenever she got too deep in her head, when they weren't certain whether she was about to snap. It was normally a satisfying feeling to summon up in other people, but with Iyo it felt like she was just driving a knife into her own gut.

She tore out the blade, letting the wound pulse freely.

"Yeah. I'll deal."

As it turned out, Iyo had quite a lot of experience with weaning concussed athletes back into their regular activities. Shouldn't have been a surprise, considering Joshi were world-renowned for the amount of concussions they sustained, second only to their neck injuries, which Iyo unfortunately had plenty of first-hand experience with as well. Her years as a trainer in her home country didn't see too much use these days, but all that knowledge was still up there, ready to be utilized at the drop of a hat.

Even if the introductory exercises were the bane of Rhea's existence. Fucking cardio.

Iyo was, of course, perfectly fine after they had both jogged their way through a quarter mile as a warm up. The Japanese woman had a bottomless tank of gas, but even so, she wasn't pushing the younger woman. No weights, no sparring, just basic exercises meant to keep the heart pumping, and prevent Rhea's muscles from having any time to atrophy.

Rhea was sweating, red-faced, and miserable even so - not exactly the image she'd prefer to portray in front of anyone, much less Iyo, who had literally been standing on her head unassisted for five minutes straight and didn't even look the slightest bit uncomfortable. Meanwhile, Rhea was dying just from a basic plank. Clearly the abs she had worked so fucking hard to define were just for show.

"Ten more seconds, you're doing great," Iyo said, clapping as she came back to her feet, the motion entirely effortless. She may have been small, but the older woman's body was compact and solidly built, perhaps not much for show but with all of the capabilities of a nationally-ranked gymnast.

They were just different. Rhea built herself for strength, sure, but also for spectacle. Her physique was carefully designed to cut a terrifying, powerful silhouette that was extremely attractive to boot. Not many women in her field were built with that particular goal in mind. So it wasn't like she was that off-put by being outperformed by someone in

aspects she really didn't pay much attention to - but it was a bitter pill to swallow nonetheless.

Iyo counted her down, then let Rhea collapse to the ground with an exaggerated huff, panting as she tried to recover from the workout.

The smaller woman sat cross-legged next to Rhea, stroking a hand down the Australian's back before she could think to distance herself. Unfortunately, the affection was something the Australian craved in her misery, despite it doing nothing to calm her hammering pulse. "I know you hate this," Iyo said kindly. "Me too, but it takes time, right?"

Rhea nodded, not moving her forehead from its spot against the ground. Ultimately, whatever semblance of dignity she may have had was erased at this point by the smaller woman's persistence. While Rhea could grumble and complain all she wanted. Any walls she tried to force up were just as eagerly batted away. The annoying part was that it seemed to take no effort at all on Iyo's part. For a woman that always had to fight for any respect, friendship, or trust, the Japanese woman was dangerously easy to give all those things up to. Or perhaps she was simply Rhea's singular fatal flaw, rendering all her defences paper mâché.

"I am so goddamn ready to get back to lifting." Rhea groaned. So much of her life had changed, and was continuing to change, that having any amount of familiar routine to look forward to would be a massive relief. She straightened back up to glare daggers Iyo's way half-heartedly. "I'm putting you through strength training bootcamp for this."

Iyo laughed at that, bright and airy. "I am looking forward to it." She stood up, extending a hand down for Rhea to take. "Let's get cleaned up, I am cooking for you tonight."

The Australian woman blinked in surprise, feeling like she was caught on the back foot once again. The idea that the woman would take over such a mundane, domestic aspect of Rhea's day was almost too surreal, even though they had already eaten their way through the reserve of takeout Priest had gotten her. It was one thing to have her around, but another for the shorter woman to take the reins in such an ordinary, intimate way.

"You don't gotta," Rhea protested, even though she had no real fight in her. Her usual cooking efforts were paltry at best, with little more than chicken breast, assorted vegetables, and rice making up her usual

meals. It got her by just fine, but when it came to hosting a guest, she wasn't exactly well-equipped. Rhea was a solitary creature - she wasn't even sure she could set a table for two at a moment's notice.

"I know." The Japanese woman agreed, smiling. "I am happy to."

The Australian woman looked at Iyo for a long moment, the smaller woman's brown eyes fixed to her in quiet enthusiasm. The woman's gaze was always intense, like she could see through to a person's soul - or maybe, just Rhea's. She couldn't say what the other woman saw in her, only that whatever it was, it was something the older woman was willing to put in work to maintain. That alone was a rare thing.

"Alright," she conceded, letting Iyo haul her up with a surprising amount of strength for such a small woman.

Iyo's hand lingered, warm and calloused, just like her own, but palms still immaculately soft and gentle. It was a stark contrast, one that encapsulated the woman well. Ready for trouble at a moment's notice, battle tested and tough, but with an inherent grace and care hiding in plain sight. Her nails, plainly kept but perfectly manicured, filed short so as not to harm unintentionally - fingers dainty and palms small.

They couldn't be more different if they tried.

It turned out that Iyo was a pretty decent cook. At first, it was surprising, but with every meal - despite Rhea's instincts to take the food and flee to her den to hide - they sat and chatted. Filling the quiet with the type of weird, halfway-uncomfortable getting to know each other smalltalk that Rhea usually avoided like the plague. But she persevered anyhow, because it was weird that the two of them had been in the coworker-rival-friend vortex for so long, with so little familiarity with each other between the very surface level things and the bone deep, aching and vulnerable feelings of fealty that tormented Rhea's unconscious thoughts.

So, Rhea got to finding out more about the quiet moments, the inbetweens, and the little scraps of past history that on their own weren't important, but which built up the woman in her head from a paper thin cutout to something approaching a real person.

It hadn't really occurred to Rhea that the transition to a foreign country that she herself had struggled with would be even more difficult for a woman who wasn't exactly fluent in the language of the new land, and was wholly overwhelmed by the culture shift. While Iyo had initially relied on Kairi, the full picture was beginning to shape up - during the years that Rhea felt like she really began to get close to Iyo in the first place, she had been on her own. Those few years had catalyzed her growth as a competitor, but they were not exactly the kindest.

Then, the lockdown. So it made sense why the older woman had become so stubbornly self-sufficient, as did the way she clung to her relationships with such intensity, and her fear of being alone again. The way Iyo's voice dropped and her eyes flickered away from Rhea made it clear that was territory that was still sensitive.

Most importantly, Rhea was becoming more versed in just how Iyo thought overall. Over the last several years, the Japanese woman's English proficiency had grown into being more than adequate for casual conversation, but she still sometimes struggled to express the emotions and concepts she wanted to, leading her to rely heavily on body language in order to make up for the gaps. That was something Rhea had already been alright at interpreting, though sometimes a smile accompanied by what sounded like a threat rang alarm bells in the Australian's head before she had time to interpret that the woman's tone was meant to be teasing.

They were getting to the point where now, Iyo could look Rhea square in the face and call her an idiot, and Rhea could only smirk and agree, knowing the joshi's true meaning was a compliment wrapped in a insult, one that indicated Rhea was brave to the point of foolish, rather than outright calling her an imbecile. And the reverse was true - when Rhea smacked Iyo on the shoulder and called her a brat, the woman knew that her energy and spirit had been appreciated.

It didn't mean that Rhea could tell exactly what Iyo was thinking at all times, because the older woman was still a mystery to her in many aspects, but they were getting there.

Oddly, Iyo's bad habits were starting to grow on Rhea as well. She was starting to get used to being woken up early by the dogs, who were all too eager to get up themselves the second they heard Iyo stir in the guest room. By the time Rhea managed to haul herself out of bed, the Japanese woman was usually in the middle of preparing breakfast for the both of them in what barely passed for pajamas - which Rhea tried

her best not to get caught staring over. She was always flocked by the pack of dogs who were eager for the chance of scraps. Iyo was more than happy to feed them, too. Sometimes, Rhea swore she broke a yolk on purpose just to have an excuse to share with the furry rascals.

So if the woman happened to make more of a mess than one person really ought to, Rhea didn't mind. A bit of extra clean-up was worth some peace of mind. She could deal with the sizable pile of dishes and laundry that inevitably followed Iyo's presence, and the pile of hair products that had appeared in the guest bath, despite the presumably short duration of Iyo's stay.

Rhea wasn't sure what would happen to all that mess, all that life that Iyo had brought with her, when she inevitably left - but for the first time, the Australian woman was hesitant to go back to her solitary routine. Even if it felt like a slow-acting poison was working its way through her, the idea of being alone again made her stomach roil in dread.

They hadn’t meant to, but the second the pressures of competition and the complicated aspects of their personal lives fell away, the two of them clicked together almost perfectly, as though the stars had finally aligned.

Iyo didn't mean to start thinking of their arrangement as permanent, and neither did she mean to make herself comfortable in Rhea's home - not when it felt like her time there could come to a halt at any given second. It was fragile, terrifyingly so, and if she conveniently forgot to mention that she was back in the USA to anyone but Rhea and their bosses - well. Not like she could tell Kairi about it anyway, so that ultimately just meant it was Dakota being left in the dark about the full situation.

She just wasn't sure what to say, mostly. The revelation that Mio and Asuka could already tell Iyo was interested in the Australian had caught her completely by surprise, and the last thing she needed was for more people to catch on. Even Rhea herself was starting to act differently around her. Not drastically, but enough for Iyo to notice the subtle changes in body language and tone. She was confident Rhea didn't know, exactly, but Iyo had caught one too many lingering gazes for it to be a coincidence.

The second that Dakota knew, it would only be a matter of time before everyone else caught on as well. That couldn't happen, at least not before they had some sort of shot at a title. Once the tag-team gold was safely around their waists, Iyo could think about confessing. Until then, her personal feelings were secondary to shared ambition, and she was content to keep them that way.

Still, the thought did occur to Iyo to let Dakota know that Rhea was healing up, just as an excuse to call the Kiwi and to maintain some semblance of normalcy. Lying to the woman directly would be worse than just avoiding her, though, and Iyo was fairly convinced if she could just get through the short period of time it took for Rhea to be medically cleared, then she would be able to build back some distance and go back to skirting the topic of her feelings as normal. Or at least, that's what she had hoped.

The fact of the matter was that when Iyo had been asked to stay, they hadn't exactly specified a time frame. Until Rhea was okay, sure, but where exactly did that end? While the worst of the physical symptoms that interfered with Rhea's day-to-day had abated, and they were weaning her back into training with the doctor's guidance, the Eradicator's temperament was a different story.

She could tell Rhea was still frustrated with the lack of action - it wasn't unusual for the woman to pace around the house like a caged animal, or to stare blankly into the fridge, too lost in thought to focus on what it was she had even gone looking for. The taller woman had developed the tendency to go out into the yard to play with her dogs, because the inside was too suffocating, but it never took long before the way she hucked the balls around always became violent and agitated.

Iyo didn't blame her for it at all. This had come close on the heels of Rhea's rather devastating shoulder injury, one she had opted not to fully fix in order to get back into action as soon as possible. In some ways, it felt like she had only just gotten back, and was now forced back into yet another cycle of recovery. Briefer, sure, but yet another speedbump to deal with that she didn't seem to know how to, mentally.

Those moments were where Iyo shone best. It didn't take much to coax Rhea out of her head and back to the real world - just a light touch to her bicep to indicate she wasn't alone, a gentle word or two. Iyo could see Rhea come back down, her expression losing that wild, untethered glaze, fogging over with something more grounded and

restrained. Still troubled in its own way, but no longer alone in unbridled devastation.

Rhea was having one of those moments as Friday night came about, all the blinds drawn in the living room so the projector could beam Smackdown across the dark, bare wall of the room. The Eradicator was in force, crouched on the edge of the sectional sofa, fingers flexing and unflexing, jaw tensed as she took in the sight of Nia and Naomi going at it. It wasn't the match that was upsetting, it was the simple urge to be in action. She missed it sorely - Iyo knew that feeling well, because it was one that was starting to sink its teeth into her, as well.

Despite their relatively recent alliance with Naomi at Wargames, Iyo wasn't really particularly rooting for any one of the women in particular - her history was really with Bianca and Candice, the others ringside were neither friend nor foe to Iyo. That wasn't the case with Rhea, who was much closer friends with Bianca and Naomi, so she could see why Rhea's nerves were a bit frayed. And Tiffany, while not exactly friends with Rhea, had helped her out in the past against Liv, even if they did end up on opposite sides of the ring soon after. Enemy of an enemy, so the saying went.

Realistically, Iyo wasn't sure if it was disappointment that caused a sigh to echo out of the younger woman when Nia took the match, leaning back against the couch cushions next to Iyo limply. Like it was over.

It wasn't.

There was one single accomplishment in the WWE that Iyo had over Rhea, one that only a single person a year could achieve. In some ways, it was a more difficult feat than winning a world championship itself - though it often came alongside it.

The briefcase was still in Tiffany's hands.

Iyo could see the moment like it was her very own, all over again, her hand unconsciously coming up to wrap around Rhea's wrist, squeezing tightly, as she watched, and waited. The Australian didn't pull away, though her arm went rigid under Iyo's grasp, turning momentarily to glance inquisitively at the older woman.

Iyo tilted her chin towards the image being projected - completely riveted as Bianca did all the hard work for Tiffany, just as she had for Iyo. There was the moment, the opportunity as clear as any cash-in

moment could be.

Tiffany was champion.

Rhea sighed in sudden relief, tension relaxing out of her. "Thank god," the Australian woman exhaled. "I was starting to worry she'd cash in on Liv or something, just for the fuckin' shock value of it."

"We have enough problems," Iyo replied. She let go of Rhea's arm to stroke down its length instead, brushing against her tattoos lightly.

The Eradicator snorted in amusement at the sentiment. "No kidding. You know I spent the entire time you had that stupid briefcase dreading the day you'd cash it in on me? Had nightmares about it, man." She laughed wryly, as though trying to downplay just how much of a real concern that had been for her at the time.

"Rhea," Iyo said firmly. "I would rather fight you one on one. No cash in. I would never." It was true. When Iyo was Miss Money in the Bank, she had thought it over extensively. She could've done it. In some ways, it would have been much simpler than having to wait for all the women Damage Ctrl had antagonized to take each other out. And it would've been a surer shot to stroll into the ring with a battered and exhausted Rhea than it was to race past a small laundry list of women that wished her only ill will.

But it ultimately seemed disrespectful to do that to someone who Iyo would've rather just beat outright. Even if Rhea's threats towards her at the time ticked her off a fair bit, it had come off as exactly what the woman was fessing up to now - fear. Certainly one day they would fight each other again, but when that happened, Iyo would stroll away guilt-free, a smile on her face and a victory under her literal belt.

That seemed to make Rhea uncomfortable, her eyes flicking away from Iyo to the screen. Her voice was a low rumble, "that's stupid of you."

"Don't care," Iyo huffed in annoyance, grabbing the remote to turn the projector off. "I am costing you title matches right now."

Rhea's brow drew down, her lips pulling into a scowl. "You are not. I've been the problem here-"

"Not tag matches, Rhea," the Japanese woman interjected, and Rhea fell quiet, her confusion written all over her face.

How was it not obvious to Rhea that had it not been for their impromptu team-up, and the restructuring of their bookings around each other, that Rhea would've already likely had a title shot against Liv? That had been all the younger woman was focused on before Wargames - awaiting the results of Iyo's match with Liv, and then stomping right back up the ladder to take her shot at the victor. But it was like the second Iyo had interfered in that street fight, Rhea had forgotten part of that selfish determination that drove her. None of this should have come at the expense of her world title aspirations.

Rhea shook her head, her lips parting in an argument that she never quite got to voice, before her eyes went distant and thoughtful, as if putting all the pieces together for herself. "You're ridiculous, chipmunk," she said finally, equal parts soft and defensive in a way that truly befuddled Iyo. "I've entirely fucked up your entire life, which isn't something that we can just undo, and you're worried about whether or not I'm going after a title that will always be there."

She was so earnest that the smaller woman was momentarily caught speechless. "But-"

"But nothing," the taller woman interrupted brusquely, shifting closer towards Iyo, their knees brushing as she moved. Iyo could only wait with bated breath for whatever was to follow, heart pounding as Rhea hesitated, words seemingly dying on the tip of her tongue before she finally found what she wanted to say. "It's important to me, but it can wait. This can't. We're in it, now, and I'm committed, alright?"

A hand settled lightly on Iyo's bare knee, unthinkingly. The older woman couldn't stop her instinctive response, reaching down to twine her fingers in Rhea's. Her heart thrummed with a quiet happiness, one she was terrified to allow, but couldn't help.

The moment was only interrupted by the chime of the doorbell. Outside, the dogs started up their usual schtick. Iyo straightened up, eager for the out. If the Australian had stared at her for any longer, Iyo might have forgotten just how important it was to keep the true depth of her feelings under lock and key. "Did you order dinner? I said I'd cook-"

"No?" The Australian woman's tone indicated that she was just as confused. Rhea pulled herself to her feet, moving to head for the front door. The Japanese woman followed, more curious about the situation than she really ought to be, but it wasn't as if she had anywhere else to be but at Rhea's side.

The Australian woman pulled open the front door with the same amount of caution one might have used when expecting a bear trap - slow and careful, peering around its edge just to be certain that there were no surprises waiting. In front of her, Iyo could barely make out the familiar silhouette of Dakota, already bursting out into a mile a minute tirade. "Thank Christ, nobody is answering their damn phones, man. Have you still been hearing from Iyo? I'm starting to worry, I still haven't gotten a response from her, and Asuka's ghosting me too -"

Dakota's rambling only paused when Rhea, confused, shifted aside just enough for the Kiwi to catch a glimpse of the other woman standing in the hall, and Iyo's stomach dropped.

Fuck.

"Uh-" was the first sound to escape Dakota's throat.

The Japanese woman froze, suddenly all too aware of how this looked to an outside observer. Iyo had been dressed for a relaxing night in - bare-faced, in a pair of sleep shorts that were completely covered by the oversized t-shirt she had borrowed from - and failed to return to - Rhea weeks ago. She was standing in Rhea's house, multiple pairs of her shoes scattered by the door, after days of avoiding texts and calls from the woman.

They hadn't done anything untoward - but the split second Dakota locked eyes with Iyo, despite all of the Japanese woman's best efforts to avoid exactly this situation, the damage had been done. She could see it, plain as day, all across the other woman's expressive face - the brief surprise, the rapid click of puzzle pieces falling together and the most uncomfortable squeak echoing out of the Kiwi as she came to a horrifyingly embarrassing realization.

One that was certainly wrong, considering how profusely Dakota immediately began to apologize. "Oh fuck. Sorry, dudes, I didn't know Iyo was here - I, uh, didn't mean to interrupt, uh-" the Kiwi was flustered, rambling as though she'd walked in on them making out, or worse. The woman turned away from Rhea, who was still standing between them in the doorway, utterly baffled as ever.

"You didn't know Iyo was here?" Rhea echoed, more to herself than anything, her tone flat with disbelief.

Dakota just laughed the way she did when the awkwardness of a situation got to be too much, "I- I'll let you two talk that one out. So, uh, clearly she's fine and cool and so I'm just gonna *goooooo* now." The

Kiwi began to slowly step back off the stoop, thumbs pointed back behind herself in the general direction of her rental car parked on the side of the street. "I'm sure you have some, uh-"

Iyo's cheeks burned. "Dakota, don't-" her voice cracked in humiliation. The last thing Iyo needed was Rhea catching on that the woman was implying something completely untrue - and the second to last thing she needed was Dakota getting any sort of ideas. She widened her eyes almost comically, hoping that their last couple years of friendship afforded some level of telepathic powers with which to tell the Kiwi to shut the fuck up.

"I'm going, I'm going!" Dakota insisted fearfully, her voice climbing an octave. "But maybe... coffee tomorrow? Iyo?" The Kiwi was still walking backwards, blind down the porch, before throwing finger guns Rhea's way, "That's cool, right?"

"Sure?" The Australian was utterly baffled at that point, looking back towards Iyo, only to find the older woman staring out at her friend with a face of pure mortified embarrassment. She seemed to understand enough, at least, to take the initiative to close the door on Dakota's awkward exit, shutting the cold breeze of the evening out from the foyer, and leaving the two of them alone once again.

"I can explain," Iyo said quickly. It wasn't what it looked like, that much was clear. She was clearly past the point of being able to hide anything at all from Dakota, but she still needed Rhea in the dark.

Thankfully, the younger woman was already fixated on entirely the wrong bit of that interaction. "I get not telling Kairi where you're at right now, but did something happen with Dakota?" Rhea's face was covered in honest confusion, a worry line drawn into her brow. "You've not been talking to her?"

Iyo's cheeks burned with guilt. She hadn't wanted to hide that aspect from Rhea either - it was just simply hard to breech the subject without the whys coming up. There was, at least, the partial truth to fall back on. "I was not sure how long I'd be staying here," the joshi admitted, shifting her weight onto one leg awkwardly, her hip cocking to the side as she averted her gaze from Rhea's. "I didn't tell anyone I was coming back early. And I didn't want to think about leaving yet."

"Oh," Rhea said quietly. It wasn't an accusatory response, nor an unkind one - she sounded more contemplative, than anything else. "My bad if that wasn't clear, but you can stay as long as you want,

chipmunk." Iyo finally dared to peek up from under her lashes to see that Rhea's eyes were fixed to her in an almost unnervingly soft stare, the corners of her lips pulled into an easy, gentle grin. "I could get used to the homecooked meals."

Classic Rhea defense mechanism, hiding a sweet gesture behind an easy, playful joke. It changed nothing about the sentiment, the thought of a long-term stay, and the offer made the Japanese woman's chest warm in a way that wasn't wholly uncomfortable, even if she did feel like she might start crying. "You would, huh?"

"I dunno if I can live on take-out forever. But only if that's something you're okay with. Wouldn't want to drive you crazy." Rhea's eyes sparkled with a teasing light.

Iyo snorted, closing the distance between them to tug Rhea into a tight hug, one which was easily returned, the taller woman's arms coming to rest loosely around Iyo's back. "Too late," she murmured softly against Rhea's collarbone.

"Rude," Rhea scoffed, warmth spreading through Iyo at the sound of her laugh.

She pulled back slightly, looking up into the other woman's face with a light smile, "Only the truth."

The next morning was predictably more interrogation than breakfast. Dakota met her at their preferred cafe, one which was a bit out of the way of Rhea's place but still worthwhile for its impressive tea selection alone. There wasn't too much Iyo was terribly picky about, but when it came to her preferred caffeine source, she wasn't willing to budge on her preferences. She had already ordered them both their regular drinks and gotten a table for the two of them before the other woman showed up - a little bit late, as usual, but Iyo was hardly in any place to complain.

"Good to see your phone's turned on, at least," Dakota teased lightly, but with a bit of a nervous edge as she settled into the booth, sliding Iyo her usual. It wasn't hard to tell the Kiwi was trying her hardest to be casual, despite her curiosity.

"It wasn't off." Iyo rolled her eyes, "Just... not on." She took a long sip of her matcha, trying to come up with an explanation for Dakota that wouldn't result in a complete disaster. Unfortunately, it was proving rather difficult, so all she could really manage was a lame, "sorry." The fact was, Dakota had every right to be confused and concerned - Iyo didn't really have a good reason to have left her in the dark about her plans, just an incredibly mortifying one.

"You know I have about a thousand questions, chicky."

Last night had been weird in a few ways, and Rhea wasn't quite sure if she was entirely imagining all of it. The way Iyo had stared at her when Dakota mentioned not knowing that the Japanese woman was there - that had been something else entirely. It wasn't as if Rhea could entirely read the other woman's thoughts in her face, but she was sure it had something to do with Dakota's reaction, the Kiwi's embarrassment, and how Iyo's face had gone from light-hearted amusement to horrified in mere seconds.

Something about that back and forth had her overthinking, despite how easy everything felt the second it was just the two of them again. Maybe she was just reading too deeply into what was already a perfectly functional relationship, grasping at straws that weren't present. There wasn't any reason to push for something more than that - but at the same time, it was hard not to when every moment they spent alone felt as though it could explode into something more with just the slightest nudge.

It might have all just been a way to subconsciously justify her attraction to the older woman, though.

Not like it had come out of nowhere, but as of late there was no denying the pull she felt. So sue her, she had a case of wandering eyes, because Iyo certainly had a case of wandering hands, and if that much was platonic for the older woman, then Rhea was entirely screwed.

She needed a second opinion to bring her delusions back to solid ground, and as embarrassing as it was spilling her guts to anyone at all about her own personal life, that second opinion had to be from someone who knew Iyo, or this would get nowhere.

Priest answered on the second ring.

No stack of pancakes, no matter how high, could be worth the utter agony of Dakota's far too caring spiel. It was all she could do to shovel mouthfuls of food down to avoid responding, but it was no use, seeming to only encourage the Kiwi more. Between all of Damage Ctrl, it had always been Dakota who was the wordiest, and the most easily overtaken by emotion. It made her a great friend under normal circumstances, if a bit overwhelming at others.

"You know that I would never judge you. No matter what the hell is happening out there in the world, or our lives. It's a total mess, but you're literally like my platonic soulmate and I need you to know that's *never* going to change, Iyo. I love you so much-"

Iyo gulped down an only half-chewed morsel of pancake, interrupting hurriedly, "-Dakota."

“What I mean is, I’m happy for you," Dakota continued, stirring her coffee around with the intensely annoying clink of silverware against china. "We’re going through some hard fucking times and it’s important we embrace joy where we can-”

“Dakota...” Iyo tried again, reaching across the table to grab her hand, stopping the restless fidgeting cold.

“I just, I don’t mean to sound ungrateful for your friendship, but maybe next time let me know when you leave a continent so I know what to expect-” The Kiwi sucked in another breath, undeterred in what was clearly a scripted monologue she had spent the morning thinking over.

“*Dakota!*” Iyo raised her voice, face going scarlet as one of the baristas glanced their way.

“- When were you going to tell me you’re in love with Rhea?”

Damian hummed, thinking through the whole of the humiliating, perhaps too-detailed venting Rhea had just finished up. "Yeah, your news debrief is more interesting than mine is."

Rhea scoffed a laugh out, the noise low and weary. She leaned forward on her desk to press her face against her palms, phone propped up against her computer monitor. His face was unfittingly small, but the way his voice echoed through the space made it feel like he was right there regardless of the real distance. As it turned out, he had been planning to call her anyway to tell her he had officially been asked to transfer over to Smackdown.

In comparison, her girl problems felt utterly mundane, but he was treating it with the utmost seriousness and care possible. She'd miss having his ear on the road.

"This morning, I walked into the kitchen and she was making me eggs exactly the way I like them." Rhea exhaled heavily.

Damian smiled, chuckling deeply. A rare thing, something they used to reserve for each other alone. "That's sweet."

The Australian woman just groaned, slumping down in her seat. "She was in boyshorts." she mumbled against her palms, hiding the blush rising on her cheeks as she recalled the torturous sight.

"Oh, you're fucked, mamacita." His laughter boomed up and out of him, the phone's picture shaking with his guffaws.

Right he was.

Dakota hunched forward, their plates and cups pushed to the side with her by her earnest eagerness to hear what her friend had to say. It was too late to backtrack - the only thing left was to fess up and hope she could convince the other woman to keep the information strictly confidential. "So, have you two, like - not that it's any of my business! But you know, just - no judging -"

"Nothing like that!" Iyo was quick to interject, cutting Dakota off before she could finish whatever question she was leading towards, the very thought of which made Iyo's face burn with humiliation. "I

mean... not that I don't..." She hesitated, trailing off awkwardly as Dakota's eyebrows raised slowly in a gesture that conveyed a silent understanding.

"But you've like, kissed, right?" Dakota's voice was soft, low enough that their conversation was private. There was nothing in it but concern for Iyo.

The shorter woman sighed deeply. If only Dakota listened as well as she spoke, they might already be on the same page. "She does not know."

"Oh." The other woman blinked in surprise, her brows furrowing in concern. "Shit. When are you going to tell her?"

"Never." Iyo was adamant about that. She would not. Could not. Or at least, not for a long while. So long that it wasn't worth thinking about at all.

"....Why?" Dakota frowned in disbelief.

Iyo's gaze fell down to the remnants of her breakfast, which suddenly looked far less appealing than it had minutes before. There were a million answers to that question, all coiled up into one name, an immovable force that prevented Iyo from seeing anything beyond it. Beyond her. "Complicated..." she muttered instead, a paltry replacement for what she truly meant.

At least with Dakota, her feelings were transparent enough that she understood anyways, reaching across the table to take Iyo's hands in her own.

"She's into you, though," Damian stated plainly. He looked Rhea directly in the eye through the screen, a knowing glint to his expression.

"Fuck off," Rhea responded reflexively, just to stamp down the little burst of hope that might rear it's head, "she's straight."

He shrugged, a single brow raising dubiously. "Hell no, she's not."

Rhea rolled her eyes in return. She was essentially an expert in risk

assessment, and there was absolutely no way she'd take those odds. The fact Priest was so assured about it was nothing if not absurd. "The fuck you mean, *'hell no'*? Don't think your gaydar is better than mine, cause that Bisexual Undertaker thing is honorary only."

The mammoth of a man just shrugged one shoulder, his face drawn in an amused little smirk that Rhea wanted to wipe off his face. It wasn't the first time he'd tried to set her up with someone, and while he may have typically had some kind of inkling, this time he had to be dead fucking wrong. Even if he wasn't, this was her friend, tag partner, now-housemate - what good would entertaining any of her more carnal desires be?

"Just trust me. I was her tag partner for longer than you've been." Damian mused.

He was so goddamn aggravating sometimes, trying to rub in some ancient match history as if a brief brush back in NXT was the be-all end-all. If he wanted to dig up old history, then dig up old history they would. Rhea's temper sparked, tongue igniting furiously. "Not even fucking true, that was *one* match! I tagged with Iyo back then too, for just as long. And for that matter, can we bring up the part where you cheered her on for the NXT Championship over me!?"

"I don't want another Kairi." Iyo slumped forward, boneless and stuffed with too much breakfast food. At least she could be honest about the fact she didn't think Rhea reciprocated at all, no matter what Dakota seemed to believe.

And believe she did. "Rhea does like women though, I think." The Kiwi's eyes narrowed, as though she was deep in thought, trying to delve through her memories to prove it. "That day Kairi got hurt, we were talking and it got kind of weird, and I assumed the same, but I *think* she was trying to like, come out or something - she was drunk though, so... er - maybe I shouldn't be sharing this."

It was like the universe wanted to throw Iyo into a spiral of self-destruction, dangling exactly what she needed in front of her and yanking it away before she could get her hopes up. She stamped it down furiously, because ultimately it wasn't about whether Rhea could reciprocate - Iyo was fairly certain that bit was a moot point - it

was whether she did.

"...*'women'* does not mean *'me'*," Iyo muttered darkly, her gaze fixed to the dregs at the bottom of her cup.

Dakota's tone lowered, speaking as though she were afraid the universe itself hearing her would jinx Iyo. "If you had seen her drunk, you'd be thinking twice about that."

Priest shook his head. Despite Rhea going off on him for nearly half an hour at that point, he was still as entirely unmoved by the outburst as he was at the start. Used to the Eradicator's less controlled side, and certainly no stranger to her more intense moods, Damian didn't even look bothered.

Ultimately, the only thing he could say to deflate Rhea was the one thing that had gotten her riled up in the first place. "You'd have been in her corner too, if it didn't mean abandoning your own." He said it without an ounce of malice - just stating facts. "You've *been* Grade-A whipped for her, Rhea."

She huffed in irritation, blowing a strand of her messy black hair off her cheek. He wasn't exactly wrong, but it was frustrating that someone else managed to see it. "I was doing pretty goddamn okay at bottling it up."

The man shifted in his seat, leaning closer to the camera, his eyes narrowing slightly, tone insistent. "Quit betting against yourself."

If it had been anyone else saying it, Rhea would have gone off on them again about how they didn't understand how often she had been betrayed, that she couldn't trust anyone but herself. None of these feelings had been real, useful things to her in the past. They were weaknesses, vulnerabilities to be exploited by her enemies. What did people expect, that she'd just bear her throat to the blade, eager to be a lamb to the slaughter yet again?

But it was Priest. He knew. Hell, he had experienced it right alongside her, had all of the same issues, hated all the same people. He knew her battered and scarred heart more than anyone.

"I'll tell her when we win the tag titles, and not a second sooner."

Chapter End Notes

blah blah blah.
bluesky.
blah blah blah.

Chapter 7: rebirth

Chapter Notes

> i am plagued by rewrites and the need to chop too-long chapters in half. but you guys have waited long enough.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Funny what a bit of time could do.

Rhea hardly recognized herself, the singular long strand of blonde trailing the side of her face reminding her of ages long past. Like the days of the first Mae Young Classic when she was still bright eyed and idealistic. Bits of that young woman still flickered through Rhea's mind when she stared at her face in the mirror.

It wasn't the only bit her stylist had bleached - just the most prominent. The other, smaller sections were scattered evenly about her head, nestled under the black. Not too much, just enough that once dyed, the pop of colour would catch the stage lights whenever she was in motion. Nowhere near the spectacle of Iyo's flash of crimson cresting over the ring from the top rope - but it wasn't meant to be an exact mirror, just a nod.

Not that Iyo caught that part of the memo with how intensely she was fussing over the choice of colour.

"Not too dark. Or pink." The smaller woman was a little bit of a hellion when she wanted to be. Her worries were certainly a bit excessive, considering they had both entrusted their regular root touchups to this very salon for the whole of their WWE careers.

But this wasn't Iyo's regular stylist, he was Rhea's. Despite the Japanese woman's exact colour being fully in his abilities to replicate, Iyo seemed stressed about the whole arrangement, as though the second she blinked, Rhea's head would turn blue.

It was stressing Rhea out, frankly, which wasn't ideal. She wasn't entirely sure whether the nausea she felt was anxiety or nagging side effects from the concussion, and the only way Rhea knew how to rule one of the two out was to reach out and grab Iyo's wrist from under the barber cape.

"Please relax."

The wind dropped out of the sails of Iyo’s diatribe, her hand cradling Rhea’s in a nervous caress. Intense care poured out of the smaller woman - it wasn't really meant to be directed at anyone in particular, but after weeks of stress and that most recent meeting geared towards poking at every one of their differences, Rhea couldn't fault her restlessness. The Australian got much the same way right before a match, hyperfocusing on every possible wrong thing, from the way her false lashes were applied to whether her musculature would catch the light right.

If this was how Iyo's pre-match jitters presented themselves - on a Saturday afternoon, in a salon hundreds of miles away from the arena they'd be ushering in the era of their partnership at - so be it.

Didn't mean Rhea wouldn't leave her hairdresser twice the usual tip to compensate.

Truthfully, of the very long list of things Rhea had thought to worry about, getting to Jersey hadn’t been one that had even crossed her mind. Just another thing to feel guilty about, since by the time they crossed through Fayetteville, Iyo’s energy had waned to a dull focus.

They’d all done drives like this before, either to save on flight costs or because it was just a more efficient use of time when chaining house shows together - but the easiest thing to do was always to trade positions.

Concussion protocols nipped that one in the bud right alongside the route everyone else had taken through the air. A couple hours to fly became what would be a full day's trip if they never pulled over for anything at all. To that end, they were off to an awful start - what was it about riding shotgun in Iyo's sleek little Camry that turned the Australian's bladder into the size of a peanut?

There was also the Aux cord situation. To Rhea, drivers always had first dibs, but Iyo hadn't connected her phone, just let the radio do its thing until it started to give way to static half an hour outside of Jacksonville. Once it did, they sat through an hour of Iyo flicking through random small town broadcasts - country music overtaking everything at the blink of an eye - before Rhea broached the topic.

“You have music on your phone, right?”

Iyo nodded tersely. “Mostly Japanese though. You didn't like it before.”

Huh? Rhea thought for one long moment, brain loading back all their past interactions to figure out when she and Iyo had ever listened to music together. Insulting her taste didn’t seem like something she’d do, but maybe it had been years ago, before Iyo’s English had started to shape up, back when misunderstandings were still commonplace.

Then, with a start, she remembered their texts, stumbling her way through an explanation. “Not an issue for me to listen to, I just meant for our theme. I was wrong anyway. It’s fine.” The Japanese woman hummed, apparently satisfied, though it still sounded a little sour. Rhea definitely would have to entertain Iyo's playlists for the foreseeable future.

Rhea input Iyo’s password, the phone opening up immediately into their text thread together. A familiar sight, just from the wrong direction. Their usage of it had dropped off a bit now that they were in the same physical location, but sometimes it was still easier than getting up or shouting from another room of the house.

She noted her contact name with a wry snort - she had become **Dog Mami** 🐶☠️🤍, and was appropriately depicted with a picture of her on the couch, cuddled up with her pack of pups. Rhea remembered Iyo peeking her head in to tell her she was off to pick up groceries, and snapping a picture before she could manage to worm her way out and preserve any dignity. Glad to know that the older woman hadn't saved it for blackmail purposes.

Navigating through Iyo’s phone was a bit more of a hassle than she bargained for. The UI and keyboard being set to Japanese hadn’t been a possibility that occurred to the Australian, and she didn’t immediately spot any familiar app icons, the homescreen surprisingly cluttered. Eventually she resorted to summoning up Siri, but the second the voice chimed back in Japanese as well, Rhea was lost.

"Can you...," Rhea gestured vaguely towards the phone, Siri immediately responding with something that she could only assume was the equivalent of *Sorry, I didn't get that.*

"Hm?" The older woman hummed in mock confusion, eyes riveted on the road. Rhea could see the corner of her lips twitching up, fighting off a laugh at her companion's fumbling attempts to do much of

anything with her phone. No wonder she'd been so nonchalant about giving up the passcode in the first place.

Inhaling deeply, Rhea switched tactics. "Iyo, can you please tell me what the word for music is?"

Iyo smiled kindly, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel to an invisible beat. "*Ongaku.*"

"*Arigato,*" The Australian rolled her eyes, earning a quick flickered glance from Iyo, a short, bright burst of laughter echoing out of her. Rhea was sure her accent was absolutely horrendous. It made the other woman happy though, so screw it. She'd play ball. "Siri, *ongaku* please."

The familiar sight of Spotify was a relief, as was the app language being set to English. She could only assume that Iyo had set her phone up in the way easiest for her day-to-day use, while still opting for some amount of immersion when possible. Or maybe she had just anticipated a situation like that one - whatever the reason, Rhea wasted no time throwing on the first playlist she saw.

Despite their previous back and forth spitballing, Rhea hadn't expected to recognize anything, but she was sorely and immediately mistaken as a familiar opening riff started to play out. She took a double take at the phone screen, finding the song and artist - some band called Dragon Ash - was completely new to her, and yet... "They sampled the Smashing Pumpkins."

"Mhm." Iyo replied, adjusting the volume a touch. What was coming out of the speakers was an odd, pleasant combination of genres - rap and R&B intermingling with the soft rock instrumentals of *Today*. The lyrics, wholly in Japanese, set Rhea right back into the same feeling she got when she first heard that instrumental as a kid, before she had any clue what Billy Corgan had been on about in the first place. She wondered if the lyrics of this song were just as grim. "I had a crush on the singer," Iyo continued, a smile in her voice. "KJ Furuya... his style was so cool."

That was enough prompting for Rhea to fish out her own phone. A quick google search later, and - well, she didn't exactly have a wide sample size regarding the type of guys Iyo went for, but there was a clear common denominator between the ones she did know about. "No judgment, but you are really into dudes in eyeliner."

Iyo kept her gaze forward, her response quick, as though she expected

to be razzed. "I like goths."

A stab of fleeting hope shot through Rhea. She had to stamp that feeling out quickly, before it could shape up into anything substantial or deluded. "Should I be setting you up with Priest?" Rhea teased instead, hoping the older woman wouldn't hear the uncertainty in her voice or notice the keen attention she was giving to Iyo's expression, the brief bite of her lip belying some deeper consideration.

The Japanese woman's grip on the wheel tightened down, a quick shoulder check and a merge into the passing lane buying her conspicuous seconds that spiralled into a million possibilities. Even as they came up to speed, the silence stretched on, and Rhea was left wondering what exactly the other woman had to think about, or why it was such a difficult topic.

It had been a joke. One intended to dig Rhea out of the corner of her mind that insisted she had a shot, spoken in Damian's own voice, ironically enough. But for whatever reason, Iyo hadn't taken it well. While the quiet held, Rhea worried that perhaps there actually was something there, or more hopefully, a sore spot from some past relationship that she shouldn't have prodded at. They had never talked about their personal lives together. Iyo, private person that she was, still remained a mystery in many aspects. Aside from a couple celebrity crushes and one unfortunate ex Rhea had heard about secondhand, she was in the dark.

“No. I am interested in someone else,” Iyo finally spoke, sweeping her gaze over to Rhea for a quick moment before focusing back on the road. As if thinking better of leaving the statement there, she appended, “It won’t go anywhere.”

Who, Rhea wanted to ask. As far as she was concerned anyone would be stupid not to be interested, but that may not be why Iyo had written off the possibility either. She *was* terribly ambitious and workdriven. Their schedules didn't agree with romance to begin with, and the woman had her eyes on gold, just like Rhea did. Neither of them had time to be worried about a potential romance.

“Sorry.” Rhea said in a manner she hoped was casual enough, because there was no possibility of voicing her true curiosity without setting herself up for a world of hurt. “If you ever want to talk I’ve got you, but don't feel pressured. It’s no drama.”

Iyo made a small humming sound of acknowledgement. Odd

discomfort grew within Rhea at how detached a response it seemed, like an offer Iyo had instantly written off - settling in the pit of the Australian’s stomach like a stone to be dislodged by force.

No better way to cut tension than with a stupid joke, just like the one she had summoned it with, “Glad it’s not Priest. I’d hate having to share you with him, he’s needy as hell when he gets sappy.”

That, at least, renewed Iyo’s good spirits, a quiet laugh leaving her like a held breath. “Sounds like someone else I know.”

The comparison hovered in Rhea's mind, a delicate thing that rounded the edges of her words before she could stop it. "Am not." The sound emerged softer than she'd meant, lacking its usual bite. Her protest, an exercise in futility. "You're my exception."

They'd made it a bit further than halfway before the sun started to dip low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the interstate. It was beginning to look like they'd have to stop for the night and finish their trek the morning of the show. That, or have Iyo drive through the night when they both knew her contacts must have already been burning her eyes.

After searching through every nearby hotel and finding them either mostly full or sporting terrible reviews, Rhea finally settled on a promising rest point. "Think you can do another hour?" Rhea asked, fiddling with Iyo's navigation system - also Japanese, god help her - until she managed to get the address programmed in. They'd be forgoing their company discounts for the homely bed and breakfast, but it seemed like the best they would get without a significant detour.

Plus, two-hundred year old farmhouses typically had some ghost stories attached to them - not that Rhea mentioned that part of her interest. They wouldn't have time to investigate anyhow. But perhaps another time. Rhea made a mental note to gently interrogate Iyo on whether the older woman would be amenable to a trip back up the eastern seaboard in the off-season. She had no clue if Iyo believed in, or had a tolerance for the supernatural, but if she didn't, the older woman might still be sold on the idea of a hike in the Appalachians.

"An hour I can do." Iyo sighed, watching the other vehicles speed right by them in a rush to get home. The evening commuter traffic between town and city was starting to dwindle. Soon the only vehicles left on the road would be the long distance ones, just like them.

Long gone were the sounds of genre-bending Japanese alt rock, replaced with a playlist of soothing Spanish folk music that still straddled the line between their worlds better than any English-speaking artist Rhea could have offered up. While it seemed to be doing the job of fighting back the tension in the smaller woman's frame, it didn't do much to erase the fatigue that was setting into them both.

An hour was a long time. Rhea fiddled with Iyo's phone again, searching for some kind of pick-me-up to see them through before settling upon the perfect form of cavalry.

Poppy.

Their hostess was friendly and accommodating - Rhea was grateful for the fact that the woman seemed to have no idea who they were. It meant that the two of them were given no special treatment, no offers of extra amenities that would only take more time out of their night. Of course, it also meant that when she informed them all the bedrooms were equipped with queens, the woman's eyes had widened just a touch when Iyo unthinkingly said they'd only need the one room, then.

Awkward, sure, but their host didn't ask questions. And Rhea wasn't about to make herself the topic of conversation at a country club tomorrow by trying to set any assumptions straight. That felt like opening a bag of worms when it came to Iyo anyway. The less Rhea invited discussion about where her sexuality might lie, the less likely she'd accidentally spill her guts and ruin the one good thing she had going on at the moment.

Compared to a typical hotel room, it had a bit more going for it where space was concerned, but smaller than the pricier suites Rhea typically opted for. Regardless, the furniture and linens were a clear upgrade from the usual fare, the bed was comfortable and warm, and the bathroom was stocked with luxury toiletries.

Despite the fact that the arrival of evening had been a clear call that driving the rest of the way that night would be a bad idea, they had still managed to make it in a touch earlier than normal where their schedules were concerned. Without access to a gym, Rhea still had a couple hours of free time to burn away, and she wasn't the only one. She could already tell that if Iyo wasn't going to use the time to get a workout in, she'd use it to stress herself out over a potential run-in with Kairi the next day.

"Want to go for a walk?" The Australian woman asked before Iyo could start practicing apologies in the bathroom mirror. She grabbed her coat, hoping the suggestion of fresh air and a little bit of movement would appeal to Iyo's active tendencies. "There's a park I saw on the nav not far from here."

The Japanese woman only blinked in surprise at the request, before the corners of her lips turned up into a gentle smile, "Sure."

Iyo tolerated the cold weather much better than Rhea did, despite donning half the number of layers. She had still bundled up a bit - the Japanese woman packed for the worst possibilities of a Jersey winter - but her trench and scarf paled in comparison to the Australians hastily thrown together protection from the elements. Rhea's hoodie, button up, and fur-lined leather jacket combo weren't individually selected for their insulation value, and her beanie certainly wasn't winter-grade wool, but she made do.

The park was quiet, apart from the occasional couple or jogger passing by, exploiting the crisp but clear weather while they could. Snow clung to the grass wherever the sun struggled to reach during the day, the rest little more than slush. The two women trudged over the slippery, muddy terrain, making their way to the centre of the park where a quaint little bridge crossed a small pond.

Rhea stopped to lean over the rails, looking down into the water below. There wasn't much to see, a thin layer of ice covering the top, but it was calming to watch, nonetheless.

A jolt of surprise ran through her at the feeling of Iyo's warm hand brushing against her own chilly one, her fingers wrapping around Rhea's. The older woman's hand was practically a furnace in

comparison, chasing the numbness from her knuckles.

"Cold?" the older woman teased, looking up at her with a sly little smile, her brown eyes sparkling with amusement. There was no true question there.

The Australian's cheeks warmed, thankful that she could blame any reaction on the weather. "Shut up," she muttered without a lick of heat, unable to pull herself away from the enticing warmth. "Yes. I'm not cut out for freezing temperatures."

Iyo giggled, slipping her fingers through Rhea's and tugging the clasped pair into her coat pocket. "It's one below."

The Australian's eyes narrowed in a mock glare. "Still awful. Whose idea was this?"

"Yours!" Iyo's laugh echoed off the water, through the increasing dark around them, even as the chill seemed to lessen. "Don't be a cranky koala."

Rhea exhaled sharply through her nose, a soft chuckle escaping alongside the puff of breath. Despite the ridiculousness of their argument, the taller woman turned, seeking more warmth. Her other hand wormed under the older woman's scarf, seeking out the heat of her neck. Iyo didn't flinch, but the effort was noticeable on her face, her lips parting in a muted shiver. "Koala, huh? Aren't I the one who keeps having to carry you around?"

"I have never asked for that," Iyo huffed indignantly, pulling the ice-cold hand off the back of her neck and giving it the same treatment as its partner. In the infinite warmth of Iyo's pockets, Rhea could feel the pins and needles begin to dissipate. She couldn't help but step closer until their bodies were nearly flush, the shorter woman tilting her head back to maintain eye contact. "You are cuddly."

That was true. "Guilty." She admitted, forcing her gaze away from Iyo out toward the rest of the park. For a moment she realized how strange they must look, wrapped up as they were but bickering like children. Rhea's mind wandered back to the owner of the B&B, how she had acted, the way that the woman had stared at them. Like she knew the truth of who Rhea was, and only held her tongue in order to not speak it to life.

Rhea pulled her hands away from the other woman’s grasp, out of her jacket, stepping back to summon a bit of breathing room. Enough that

through the shadows, they looked only like what they were - a pair of friends, out for a bit of exercise. Iyo tilted her head. A question unspoken and unanswered floated between them. To acknowledge would admit to something which didn't exist.

"We should head back before I turn from a koala to a drop bear." The jest sounded hollow to Rhea's ears, but if Iyo detected her sudden discomfort, it was hidden behind a layer of genuine confusion.

"Drop bear?" The flickered furrow of her brow would've been enough to summon a smile to Rhea's face, if she had brought herself to look at Iyo at all.

Instead, she turned to make her way back down the path, retracing muddy footprints back from where they came. "...we have some ground to cover."

Rhea was being odd. She often was, and Iyo had become used to reading the mood shifts as they came, the woman's body language speaking clearer than her words ever did. Sometimes though, she really did turn on a dime, as though Iyo had missed some nuance in the conversation.

Maybe it was the result of closer than normal proximity for such a stretch of time, but it seemed like the unease had crept in sometime after they had left the cramped quarters of Iyo's car, and was now thickening the air with a quiet that felt wrong to break. It wasn't comfortable, but neither was it openly conflicted in any way. Rhea still worked her way through her normal habits, easing into the bathroom to change for the night and brush her teeth, phone set on the side of the bed that was consistent with what Iyo had grown used to from their shared hotel rooms.

On paper, it was routine. Nothing was out of place. But it was all a touch too mechanical.

By the time Rhea stepped back into the room, Iyo had already settled under the covers. She had her phone in hand, trying to distract herself by flipping through her social media feeds and catching up on the latest posts from her Damage Ctrl stablemates - if they could still be called that, anymore. Dakota was busy hyping up her IC finals match

for the next day, while Kairi was conspicuously silent. And as for Asuka, the last Iyo had heard from her had been a succinct text to say she hoped Iyo had a plan for talking things out with the other joshi.

She didn't. A week on from the latest spell of conflict, and Iyo was no closer to figuring out how she would handle any of it. All she knew was that she was sitting up in bed, staring at a woman who seemed just as lost. Peace balanced on a knife's edge, one slip away from slitting its own throat.

The Australian cleared her throat. "I've never been awake when...," she started, then paused, seeming to consider her next words. The sentence was completed with a vague, "Y'know."

Iyo had no clue what Rhea was on about. She locked her phone, setting it on her side table. "What?"

The taller woman sighed deeply, trudging over to the bed, only to hover over it awkwardly. "Last time I was asleep by the time you laid down. I don't know why this is so bloody awkward." She mumbled, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Absurd. The type of things Rhea worried about would never cease to amaze her. Iyo lifted the covers from Rhea's side of the bed with a roll of her eyes. "Get in. Or I will sleep on the floor." Iyo threatened.

The Australian didn't even hesitate, slipping under the covers. "You wouldn't."

"Maybe," Iyo mused softly, reaching over to the bedside lamp to click it off. The room went dark, the only light streaming in through the curtains, cast from a couple lampposts outside. "I like this better."

Rhea hummed, laying on her back. She stared up at the ceiling, her gaze distant. There was still some discomfort present, so Iyo turned on her side, facing the wall away from the other woman. careful to keep a healthy gap between their bodies - the same way she had before, even when the younger woman had been asleep and uncaring. If that was what Rhea was afraid of, it was easily solved.

For a while, that's all there was, the two of them laying in the same bed but not quite sharing it. The sound of Rhea's breath behind Iyo was even, and the bed hardly shook with her movements. If Iyo didn't know any better, she'd assume the other woman had fallen asleep.

But a few moments later, the mattress shifted behind her. "Iyo?" Rhea's

voice broke the silence.

"Hm?" Iyo opened her eyes, turning just enough to catch sight of the other woman pushed halfway up on her elbows. Her profile was illuminated dimly, just catching the slope of her nose, a glint off her pale irises. It wasn't enough to see the expression on her face, the rest of her features cast in deep shadow. "What is it?"

A pause, and then, "Are you cold?" The Australian's question came out in a whisper.

Iyo sighed happily, all the worries of the day flooding away. "Come here," she murmured, lifting the blanket enough for Rhea to slip closer.

The taller woman's arm wrapped around Iyo's waist, and she pressed herself right up against her back, her face buried into the older woman's hair. Iyo could feel her heartbeat against her back, the gentle thump of it soothing and slow. "Thanks."

"I told you, you're a koala." Iyo teased, remembering the last time she had woken up in Rhea's unconscious grip. By her lack of reaction, she clearly didn't remember cuddling up to Iyo then, or the way the smaller woman had wormed her way out of Rhea's vice grip in the early hours of the morning. In her drowsy haze, she didn't seem shy about being clingy.

"If you tell anyone about this..." Rhea breathed softly against Iyo's nape, voice heavy with exhaustion. Her hand rested low across the smaller woman's abdomen, fingers curling into the fabric of her sleep shirt.

Iyo's eyes fluttered shut, covering Rhea's hand with her own. "I can keep a secret."

A part of Iyo had expected to wake up with Rhea wound around her even tighter, and she wasn't entirely wrong. The taller woman's face had buried itself against Iyo's neck, long legs entwined with hers, hand a touch too far up her shirt to be excusable. But the rest of her was a dead weight, blissfully ignorant to how thoroughly she had managed to invade Iyo's personal space. All for the best, really. It was easier to

wiggle free from her embrace and get ready for the day than deal with a worsened version of the previous night's awkwardness.

In fact, by the time Rhea stirred, Iyo was already ready to leave, packed and dressed. She rushed Rhea through the same process, and before long the road was stretched out before them again, the last couple hours of travel melting away in the blink of an eye.

Still, by the time they made it to the arena, the venue was already swarmed. They were a few hours off from showtime, but fans and press were already crowding the entrance, eager to get a glimpse of the talent. While the two of them weren't even officially on the card, they were both well aware that their presence at the event was anticipated - and the fact that so many other recent foes had all found their way into the same building had to have drawn even more attention.

As such, Iyo had expected a barrage of questions from the moment they made their way up to the entrance, but instead, all she got were a couple shouted demands to know where Kairi was, and why Rhea was alongside her instead of her own faction. Even those were drowned out by the cheers, the overwhelming positive response to their arrival. That much was a surprise. Iyo hadn't been keeping tabs on the online perception of her and Rhea's new partnership - it was an ugly, abrupt, chaotic thing from the inside view, regardless of her personal, much more lenient feelings on the matter.

From the outside though, it seemed like people were hungry to see how the mess unfolded. The frantic cheers of Rhea's name hadn't lessened any in wake of the previous week's fumbles, and the welcome back chants for Iyo were unexpected. Had her presence - or lack thereof - actually been notable to anyone aside from the woman at her side? The proof was all around, yet it was still hard to accept.

The scene inside the arena was much the same. It was more congested than a regular show. VIP guests were already being ushered about, broadcast staff darted about backstage to be sure everything would be in order, and what seemed like the entire roster had come out to the show - if not to wrestle, then to make special appearances to introduce themselves on their new platform. Mutual anticipation had wormed its way through every attendee at what would come. The night defined itself as a massive era-defining event, and proving that would come down to the smallest of details. Either it would be a self-fulfilling prophecy, or everything would go belly up, and the vultures would be upon them all.

Understandably, the line to hair and makeup was a disaster. One they'd need to brave eventually, but for the moment, it was far more appealing to slip off to the locker room to settle themselves. Rhea, especially, seemed overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the crowd, a hand clenched at her side in a subtle show of stress. A part of Iyo worried at that. Normally, the younger woman's catharsis came through the more violent aspects of their work - anxiety balking before brutality. Tonight, there would be none for them. Only the bits Iyo hated the most as well, the unnerving need to present themselves before a crowd they couldn't see.

Thankfully, the locker room held no more complications. Rhea followed Iyo in like a massive, timid shadow, hair tucked back under a hat to hide the new highlights until they were ready to reveal them, face bare of anything except a bit of concealer she'd thrown on nervously in the car. For the most part, those inside were too busy with their own matters to pay them any mind, though Lyra did pause midway through hanging her things in her locker to give them a nod of acknowledgement.

From the corner of her eye, Iyo spotted Tiffany in the far corner of the locker room. Or rather, she spotted the glint of gold which accompanied her. The reward of betrayal, a game played well. Another day they'd have to congratulate her properly. Iyo was curious how the belt would suit her - she knew from personal experience that the transition from briefcase holder to champion wasn't an easy one. Planning instincts and the ability to strike when opportune were wholly different from the ones needed to defend a title. It didn't help that cashing in was like kicking a wasp nest - every wrestler who felt slighted by the action swarming in response.

Odd, that acquiring an unexpected tag partner in Rhea felt much the same way. Like running a contract into a ring cloaked in disarray, in the hopes that the moment would favour her enough to secure victory. Only to realize that getting that far was the easy part - justifying herself after the fact was the challenge.

Rhea seemed to be fairing no better with her internal conflicts. She'd sequestered herself on a bench towards one end of the room and had set to rifling through her bag, hauling out bits and pieces of the outfit planned out for the night. Similar to her ring gear, but with enough adjustments to befit a live premiere. Her usual boots, acid-washed jeans instead of tights, a red leather bustier - typical Rhea fare. But as she laid it out, Iyo had to admit, the colour palette would be a good bit brighter than typical for the goth.

Iyo busied herself with changing into her own look for the night. Not quite matching - metal-studded black crop top, jeans that were baggy where Rhea's hugged her, chunky platform boots, and of course, the centrepiece of it all - an ungodly fluffy orange bomber jacket that still left her partner looking comparatively monochromatic. By the time she'd pulled on her boots, Rhea was nearly done herself, having shimmied into her jeans, and had started to fuss with the lacing on her bustier. Something clearly not meant to be attempted alone.

The Australian woman seemed to realize that, huffing in irritation as she tried to contort herself to get her arms into the right position before giving up and shooting Iyo a pleading look.

"Turn around," Iyo sighed, moving to stand behind the other woman. Her fingers worked deftly, pulling the cord tight and lacing it up the back with the same practiced ease of tying her boots, double checking the security of her knots.

When she stepped back to evaluate her work, Iyo couldn't help but take a moment to appreciate the view. The red leather hugged Rhea's torso, accentuating the lean muscle of her back, the pale skin of her shoulders a stark contrast to the dark ink of her tattoos. The red streaks in her hair, now that she'd taken off her hat, were a vibrant and violent slash of colour against the black, catching attention with every slight movement of her head.

"Looks good," Iyo said, her voice a little softer than she intended. She reached out to smooth a stray lock of hair back into place, her fingers brushing against the nape of Rhea's neck. The taller woman's shoulders stiffened reflexively at the touch, but Iyo didn't draw away until the tension eased, Rhea turning a moment later.

"Thanks," Rhea responded, her eyes meeting Iyo's briefly before flitting away again. It was strange to see her dressed like this without the usual battle paint, the dark eyeliner and lipstick that typically set off her features. Everything seemed more exposed like this, vulnerability evident where there should've only been bristling confidence. The Australian cleared her throat, her voice dropping back to its usual register, "Let's go get prettied up, yeah?"

Iyo's nod of agreement was met with a relieved smile, grateful for the spot of normalcy, and the two women headed off to join the rest of the talent waiting for their turn in the chairs.

There wasn't any time to relax before they were hustled out into a cloistered side hallway for their first pre-recorded segment. They hadn't been given much of an outline on the short notice - just the heads up they'd be having a run-in with Liv and Raquel for the first time since the street fight that had kickstarted their unlikely alliance. Even with a bit of time to amp herself up for it, Rhea seemed to be stuck in her head - her usual brashness dimmed to a quiet simmer as she paced back and forth, trying to psych herself up.

What they were told was to appear like they were enjoying themselves backstage - positive energy to help sell the spectacle of the event - before the interruption. Somehow despite frequent positive, casual interactions with Rhea, when it came to acting the part, Iyo found herself at a loss. The production lead huffed in annoyance, "Come on! Don't you two hang out? This isn't that difficult."

"We do!" Rhea interjected, stopping her pacing. "It's just not the same when you're being watched like this," she gestured at the camera crew, the director, and the swarm of people who had shown up to spectate. There was no way to miss Shayna in that crowd, lurking off to one side with a stoic expression on her face. Intimidating, even if she did have a bowl of stew in her hands. Enemies at every turn.

"Can't you just act like you're having a good time?" The man was getting more irritated by the moment, and Iyo couldn't help but think the entire situation was being mismanaged. Rhea wasn't the type to play along to please someone else, and her irritation was hitting a breaking point.

"Fine!" She spat, turning to look at the smaller woman. Before Iyo knew it, she was being hoisted off the ground in one swift motion, plopped down on a nearby storage case, just for Rhea to haul herself up alongside her, throwing an arm over her shoulder. "Happy now?" the Australian shot back at their director, who seemed momentarily stunned that his request had actually been met. It clearly wasn't what he had been intending, but Rhea wasn't the type to do casual chit-chat, not unless it involved a mouthful of popcorn and a dog at her side. The back halls of RAW were a dangerous beast, one neither of them would ever truly relax in.

Regardless, Iyo couldn't help her laughter, the whole thing feeling absurd. Rhea's arm was a comforting weight on her shoulders, and when she looked at the younger woman's incredulous expression, Iyo

saw her own momentary cheer infecting her. A chuckle rose in the taller woman's throat, and soon enough the two were both in stitches, unable to stop laughing, as though the entire situation was completely ridiculous.

And it was. She and Rhea had spent the last week running all over the globe, and now they were sitting on a pile of storage cases, acting as though they were having a good time when the entire situation was so fraught with tension it felt as though the world would shatter at any moment. As though they weren't both scared shitless that their carefully balanced truces would crumble, and they'd be left in the ruins, scrambling to find solid ground.

"Can't wait to get out there and actually kick some ass," Rhea grumbled good-naturedly, giving Iyo's shoulders a squeeze.

Iyo nodded, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "Long list of asses."

That seemed good enough for production to finally cue in their interruption. Liv and Raquel sauntered in. Or rather, Raquel sauntered, Liv all but bounded their way with the glee of a rabid Pomeranian. The championship belt glittered from Raquel's shoulder enticingly, as though she had earned it just by being associated with the perky blonde pest alongside her.

"Aw, look who's talking shit from the loser's circle?" Liv sing-songed. "Nice hair, Rhea. Real cute." Iyo felt Rhea go rigid, and could imagine her game face slipping on without even a glance in her direction. She'd been on the receiving end a few times, and while the Eradicator's glower had never particularly bothered Iyo, she had to admit the larger woman made for an intimidating figure. Back straight, chin tilted up, icy stare down the bridge of her nose. Her arm fell away from Iyo's shoulder, pushing herself to her feet.

"You know what you get when you multiply a loser with another loser?" Raquel cut in, eyes glinting the way they always did when she and Rhea had the opportunity to go tit for tat. Even after all that time apart, it had taken practically no time at all for her to fall back into Liv's snarky antics. Must everything sound like dialogue from a teen comedy?

Rhea took another step forward, until Iyo was all but blocked from sight of the other two women, a barrier between them. Her posture was tense, hands already clenching into fists at her sides. The taller

woman was never one to back down from a confrontation, and Liv and Raquel were a constant source of provocation. Until recently, she had been prepared to charge headlong into any conflict with them outnumbered and outgunned.

"A double loser," Liv chimed in answer, even as Rhea glared down at her. Iyo slipped down off the crate, ignored by the other three women. That suited her just fine. She had gotten used to being the silent underdog, the one people underestimated because she was quiet, small, and wasn't as prone to drawing attention to herself. That's why she was so explosive in the ring, because no one expected it. "Think you bit off more than you can chew this time?"

"Why are you even here, Liv?" Rhea questioned, her voice dropping to a low rumble, refusing to address Raquel's bothersome presence at all. Pale eyes narrowed, jaw clenched, her fists itching to unleash the hell that rumbled inside. Beautiful as a storm cloud. The Eradicator's rage was something to behold. "Thought you had successfully wormed your way out of a title defense."

The blonde twirled a strand of hair around her fingertip, casting a brief glance back to Raquel - just long enough to pat the championship belt pointedly. “They want the champ front and centre during the big debut, since it’s been so long since anyone deserving filled the role.” As always, her grin was diabolical. “Besides,” Liv continued, her tongue barbed and quick to exploit weakness as ever, “You’re the one who took a detour on your warpath to adopt a stray.”

The stray had heard enough. With a quick burst of speed, Iyo slipped past Rhea, kicking Liv's legs out from under her. She caught the smaller woman as she went down with enough care to ensure she didn't hit the concrete floor too hard, a kindness that felt like its own manner of viciousness. They wouldn't let the championship be lost again to something as senseless as a backstage injury. Gold would be won through a proper fight, or it wouldn't be worth a thing.

"Rhea will get her match." Iyo warned coldly, crouched over the other woman. Liv's eyes were wide, pupils dilated in surprise. Raquel went to dart forward, the Eradicator in question cutting off her advance like they had planned this out. Something about her posture sent a heady rush of power through Iyo. No matter how fixated Rhea had been on Liv in the moment prior, they had snapped back to being on the same wavelength with the type of dangerous ease that normally took years to broker. It was chemistry, plain and simple. "You won't wait long."

She stood, backing away to stand at Rhea's side. Liv scrambled to her feet immediately. Raquel's hands caught her, steadying her.

"I'll believe the two most loyal women in the division when I see it," the blonde spat at their backs, even as the camera tracked their exit, Rhea flipping the duo off as they went. "You two are a match made in hell!"

Maybe they were that. It was better, at least, than being alone in heaven.

The show itself was decent enough, despite all the performative seat-shuffling and posturing going on. All the wrestlers were rotated in and out of the same front-row seats just long enough for the camera to catch them. As ridiculous as dancing along to Jey's entrance music was one second and staff coming by to swap them out for the next group the next, there was still something to be said for a night where their main job was to watch some wrestling.

As they were ushered up to the overflow VIP seating towards the top of the arena, Iyo took note of Rhea's relative lack of interest in the show itself, the woman fidgeting in her seat and scanning the crowd. "You okay?" the older woman asked, leaning over to speak in her ear. Rhea's head tilted slightly, her eyes flickering to the side to meet Iyo's gaze. Her fingers were drumming on her thigh restlessly.

"You saw Shayna watching our segment, right?" Rhea murmured, her voice soft and low. She glanced back toward the ring, tracking the movements of McIntyre as he sulked out from view.

The Intercontinental finals were next. Iyo had already shot a few good luck texts Dakota's way in the group chat between them and Rhea, devolving into a flurry of excited emoticon garble that Rhea eyeroll emoji'd at in the thread, but chuckled at in reality. That was the last bit of good mood the woman had mustered up before she had set about surveying the arena like a hawk.

"Yes," Iyo confirmed, though her worries were less centred on Pure Fusion Collective. "I don't think they'll do anything. Shayna and Sonya are up here with us." She looked over their way, seated a couple rows above them, further down in the same section. Sonya was still wearing

the marks of Rhea's brutality, but other than that they looked... fine. Relaxed, even. They were enjoying the show, the same as everyone else. It was a strange sight.

The Eradicator scoffed. "Have you seen Zoey anywhere?" She gestured around pointedly. It seemed that the Australian woman wasn't so much searching for danger as searching for a lack of it. The absence of the third member of the PFC could be a red flag, a warning that something was amiss. But it could also be irrelevant. Iyo had thought it over herself - the three women weren't the types to often interfere with matches that weren't theirs, despite the events of the previous week. They were the types to cut others down backstage when everyone's guard was down, so they could exploit that weakness in a future fight.

Problem was, they had so many potential enemies to worry about, all the danger had begun to blur into a mess of paranoia. How could Iyo blame Rhea for that? But neither could she express the person she was truly worried about was the one they both avoided bringing up like the plague. Dakota herself had privately confirmed she hadn't heard anything from Kairi in the past couple of days either. Perhaps she was just nursing the physical and emotional injuries inflicted by her loss, or perhaps...

Iyo couldn't add on to Rhea's growing mountain of concerns. So instead, she reached over to rest a hand on Rhea's knee. "Dakota and Lyra have the advantage if it's just Zoey. They're friends too," she reminded the brooding goth, squeezing lightly. "It will be a fair fight."

Rhea exhaled a shaky breath, her shoulders slumping. "If those two move an inch, even to go to the bathroom, you're coming with me to make sure they're not up to anything," she muttered, clearly still not convinced.

Iyo's eyebrows furrowed. "That is..." her words trailed off, the sudden sting of music signalling the beginning of Dakota's entrance. "Okay. I'm with you." There was no point in fighting Rhea on her worries. If it helped put her at ease, and ensured her friends' safety, so be it. She could entertain a bit of suspicion.

For now though, it was time to focus on the match. Dakota strutted out onto the stage, a wide grin on her face. Iyo only wished she could be in two places at once, accompanying both of the Australasians, but it wasn't her call anymore. She had been instructed to be here, visible as one half of a tag team that would see action the very next week -

forced to watch her other friend from the nosebleeds instead of ringside.

Lyra followed shortly after, and the two met up in the ring, exchanging pleasantries and formalities. It was nice to see a bit of genuine sportsmanship in their business. Even once the opening bell rang, their friendship was evident in the easy way they traded blows, the mutual respect that came with appreciating one another's art. The match was an impressive display of skill and talent from both of them, the sort of fight Iyo would normally have been thrilled to witness, but it was hard to focus when she could feel the tension radiating from Rhea's body, the way she kept glancing at Shayna and Sonya out of the corner of her eye, as though expecting the worst at any moment.

The pace of the fight ramped up, and Iyo had to force herself to look away from Rhea, to pay attention to the match. Lyra came diving off the top rope, just to be caught under the chin by one of Dakota's boots. A moment later, Dakota darted around the perimeter of the ring, lining up her Kaio Kick, following up immediately with a Kairopractor that had Iyo squeezing down on Rhea's thigh to suppress her own excitement.

It would've been a three-count on anyone else. But Iyo had been in the ring with Lyra before. She had bested, and been bested by the Valkyrie.

Lyra kicked out.

Rhea made a tight sound in the back of her throat, a hand latching onto Iyo's. The older woman looked over at her, and the taller woman seemed to be at a loss for words. "Can you believe...?"

Iyo squeezed her hand. "I can." There weren't very many that could claim to beat her when it came to a fair fight. Even less that Iyo could admit deserved the win. Of that delicately small winner's circle, Lyra was perhaps the one who had the most potential to surprise.

Dakota was reeling at the kickout, just as dazed from it as Rhea was, and Lyra was quick to capitalize. A quick fling into the corner, and before anyone knew it, Lyra was setting up for Nightwing. There was no stopping her from there, the Valkyrie's finisher connecting, sending Dakota sprawling out across the mat.

The Kiwi was made of tougher stuff, she proved it then and there. Lyra's pinfall didn't hold, and the two scrambled back to their feet, trading blow after blow until the pair were back on equal ground. The

crowd was going wild around them, chants for both women and for the match at large booming loud enough that there was no doubt it would be picked up in the broadcast. They both deserved the moment, clear as day.

Then, Lyra left herself open for a second too long, and Dakota grabbed hold, stunning her with a headbutt that could be heard even from the cheap seats. The crowd fell to a hush, anticipating a setup to another finisher. Iyo couldn't bring herself to hope yet, not until she saw it connect.

A flash of movement caught Iyo's eye, down behind where the cameras were positioned. As though sensing the slightest turn of Iyo's head, Rhea followed her gaze - the two of them catching sight of a blonde-and-blue blur, ducking behind a camera rig. Kairi. A world away, with clearly not a lick of altruistic intentions about her as she ran down along the side of the ring.

Iyo's heart leapt into her throat, helpless but to watch. Beside her, Rhea curled an arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer. As though that would stop anything from happening. As though it would stop time the moment Dakota hit her G-T-K, Lyra falling onto the ropes - so dazed that Iyo knew the next pin would cinch it all.

And Kairi leapt up to the apron to elbow Lyra clean in the face, the younger wrestler falling in a heap inside the ring the same moment that Kairi spun to hail the crowd and the cameras in equal measure.

Dakota was oblivious to it as she rolled the younger wrestler up for the pinfall, but the ref was anything but. With one dooming sweep of her arm off to the timekeeper's corner, the bell sounded, but not to declare a victory.

"As a result of a disqualification, the winner of the match, and your inaugural Intercontinental Champion, is Lyra Valkyria!" The announcer's proclamation hung in the air for a split second before the arena shattered into a devastating cacophony of sound. Incensed boos erupted from the crowd, jeers echoed even by some of the wrestlers in the stands, unbelieving at what they had just seen, infuriated that a match defined by sportsmanship and fair play could end in such a manner.

No one understood whose side Kairi had taken. None except Iyo, and Rhea, and Dakota, sitting shell-shocked and heartbroken in the ring while Lyra stared at her with clear disgust dripping down her bleeding

face. For them, it was clear. Their world had frozen over, left only to watch as Kairi sarcastically bowed to the new champion.

Damage Ctrl was shattered at last.

Chapter End Notes

i miss them. all the thems that there are to miss.

Chapter 8: ashes

Chapter Notes

> hello and welcome to another too-long chapter, good luck reading this one in a single sitting. oops.
>
> content warnings are appropriate here. a bit of homophobic taunting, and the start of some sexual content. please note the rating change.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one slept much that night. Despite Rhea's best efforts to track her down, Kairi had vanished like a ghost in the wind after the match. For the best, since she didn't have any idea what she would do once she got her hands on the Pirate Princess. Try to forcibly haul her back to Iyo, and then what? Watch an argument unfold that was half her own doing, despite how helpless she felt to prevent it?

It was something to do, though, something to fill the time while Iyo and Dakota consoled one another through the wreckage of their faction. The two remaining founding members of Damage Ctrl had each other, at least, but that left Rhea the odd woman out. It felt wrong to stand there and watch them work through their tears and anger, wrong to even be present at all. So instead, she spent the night pacing through the corridors of the arena, shooting dirty looks to anyone she could. If nothing else, she could scare off any other threats. The only real encounter she had was a brief glaring match with Zoey, missing in action all along due to a backstage scuffle with Candice LeRae that had both of the women suspended from on-camera action.

Iyo would have enjoyed that news under different circumstances.

By the time Rhea worked her way back to the other women, a brief catharsis had settled. Dakota had decided to stick with them, so whatever third wheel discomfort the Australian felt, it was time to do away with. There was a brief squabble with Iyo on who was driving - Rhea insisted she felt well enough to get them to their hotel, and while Dakota conceded to being too exhausted to confidently get through the trip, the Japanese woman swivelled cleanly from concern for Dakota to concern for Rhea, as if she were the current priority at all. The truth was, the Australian was through being a burden to her

friends, so she insisted until they relented.

How they all ended up in Rhea's hotel room, however, was a mystery. *Mi casa es su casa* had somehow morphed into *Mi casa también es la casa de tu amigo*. At least Iyo didn't mention who the booking was under, or that it was a shared room. Dakota had grown on Rhea over the past couple of weeks, but she wasn't quite at the comfort point to admit she and Iyo had gotten to the point of bed sharing on the road. Avoiding giving off the wrong impression to nosy southerners they'd never see again was already rough. Doing the same with an all-too accepting woman was out of the question. The last thing she needed was for Dakota to try to give her *the talk*.

So that was how Rhea ended up laying on a tiny hotel couch in the wee hours of the morning, a too-small blanket thrown over her and her feet dangling off the end, while her friends sat crosslegged on Rhea's bed, scarfing down ice cream while an episode of NCIS played in the background. She could've gone out and rented another room. She could've politely asked them to go to Dakota's. She could've even kicked Dakota out entirely. She could've done a lot of things, but Rhea didn't, because at the end of the day, this was all she had, too. They needed each other.

"What are you thinking?" Iyo asked, the spoon in her hand scraping against the bottom of her pint of ice cream.

Rhea sighed, shifting slightly on the couch to get more comfortable. The hard arm of the couch dug between her shoulder blades. "What makes you think I'm thinking?"

"Because you're quiet," Dakota chimed in, reaching over to adjust the volume of the TV down from droning quiet to a whisper. "Nothing good happens when you're quiet." There was a hint of a smirk on her face as she teased, but it lacked energy. It had been a long night, and Rhea knew the older woman was struggling to hold herself together. Her usual cheer had been replaced by a solemn, subdued version of herself. Due to the nature of their business, they'd all seen each other at their worst. Thankfully, this didn't seem to be that for Dakota - she was sad, but sane.

"I guess I'm just thinking that this year has sucked." Rhea mused.

"It's been five days." Iyo pointed out, spoon hanging out of her mouth, eyes narrowed. As if she was disappointed she had to remind her. The calendar had changed, but that hadn't stopped the world from being a

giant pile of shit. January first hadn't magically made everything better. "Did you forget New Years?"

"Sorry," Rhea apologized, "No. Yes? Not the good parts." Forgetting that meant forgetting their night together, which while cloaked in some of the haze of the concussion, was still something Rhea held onto like a lifeline. It was one of the few happy moments she'd had in the midst of everything. None of the past week had been bad up until that moment when Kairi's elbow had collided with Lyra's face. One event didn't deserve to be cobbled in with the rest. "That wasn't what I meant."

Dakota looked between the two of them, her eyes narrowing in suspicion, "Did you two spend the New Year together?"

Fuck.

"No." Iyo and Rhea answered in tandem, their eyes meeting. The younger woman was grateful that the smaller wrestler seemed to be on the same page as her. Iyo quickly looked away, busying herself with picking out the last melted dregs of mint chip from the bottom of the carton.

"I was flying back." The Japanese woman supplanted smoothly. Nice. Technically the truth - so long as Dakota didn't do the rapid fire time zone math that had all but killed Rhea's brain at the time. The full explanation felt like a minefield, but thankfully Iyo seemed to have it handled. Why she was dodging the question, Rhea had no idea, but she was just glad there wouldn't be a full interrogation.

"Then why-" Dakota began, before the ringing of Iyo's phone cut through the quiet murmur of the TV. Iyo dropped the spoon into the empty ice cream container and scrambled to grab her cell, frowning down at the screen before tapping to answer.

"...Hai," Iyo answered hesitantly, murmuring out a few quiet words in Japanese before looking up at Dakota, then Rhea. Her expression spoke clearly of trepidation, raising a finger to her lips to signal quiet. Rhea sat up, propped on one elbow and staring at Iyo with a furrowed brow. Dakota's eyes were glued to her as well, the older Kiwi leaning forward. All Rhea was able to make out from there was a quiet "...owabi..." before Iyo peeled the phone away from her ear just long enough to put it on speaker.

Asuka's frustrated voice came through clearly, but her rapid fire speech was far too much for Rhea to follow. Next to Iyo, Dakota

looked wholly uncomfortable - whatever Asuka was saying couldn't be good. Rhea fumbled under the blanket for her phone, pulling up a translation app to see if she could parse anything. It was clear that the older woman was admonishing Iyo, the words amounting to something along the lines of, *"You have done nothing!"*

"I thought I'd have more time," Iyo responded hesitantly, *"I didn't think she would hurt Dakota."* Hearing her like that was disturbing. Gone was the fearless woman who instilled awe in every movement. Judging by Dakota's muted expression, it wasn't a wholly new sight for her.

Not for the first time, Rhea found herself curious about the whole of Damage Ctrl's dynamic. Iyo and Dakota were founding members as Rhea and Damian had founded the Judgment Day - and yet Iyo seemed to defer to Asuka instantaneously. And because Iyo did, Dakota deflated right alongside her.

"...She has no one in her corner..." Asuka's tone softened, the translation scrawling across Rhea's screen stuttering as bits of her sentence went unheard, *"...unfair... Fix it, Iyo."*

Rhea frowned, glancing up from her phone. Dakota was already looking Rhea's way, guilt radiating off of her. Her hand reached out to touch Iyo's arm, only for the smaller wrestler to brush her off, standing up from the bed and beginning to pace.

"I've been loyal for years." Iyo responded, voice sharpening back into its usual conviction. "She runs, I follow. It's always the same!" The Japanese woman gestured emphatically with her free hand as she spoke, as if Asuka could see her frustration mounting. *"You know how I feel."*

There was a pause, a brief moment of silence where the only sound was Iyo's slow, deep breathing as she tried to calm herself down. The same post-match cool down Rhea had become familiar with, transforming her from the battle-ready Genius of the Sky to just Iyo. Finally, Asuka's voice came through again, this time with a frustrated sigh, *"This would never have happened if I was there."*

A click, and the line went dead. Iyo stared at her phone, her shoulders slumped. "Chikushou," she cursed, setting the device down on the bed, turning to look at her friends. Her eyes darted between them warily, before settling unnervingly on the phone in Rhea's hand. "Did you understand?"

"Only a bit." Rhea admitted, setting the device aside. If the

conversation was meant to be fully private, Iyo would've kept it off speaker, but she nonetheless felt sheepish about the parts she had understood. Sensitive topics were becoming a norm, and not one Rhea appreciated.

"She's really hard to understand when she gets like that even if you're fluent," Dakota chimed in helpfully, still eyeing Iyo warily. "I'm only like, 70% confident myself, chicky." She collected up the bits and pieces of their junk food, tossing the empty containers into the garbage. A distraction from the tension that was starting to rise in the room.

Iyo sighed, tucking her hair behind her ear as she sank down to sit on the edge of the bed, watching the TV instead of looking at either of them. "When I went to Japan, we were on the same page. Not now. She thinks I - we," the Japanese woman corrected, with a tilt of her head Dakota's way, "should apologize for..." she trailed off, gesturing at Rhea.

The Australian sank further behind the small blanket, as though it could swallow her own guilt, "Apologize for me?"

"Apologize to Kairi. For being around you." Iyo corrected, her dark eyes finally meeting Rhea's, a flicker of emotion crossing her face before she looked away again, "I won't."

Dakota hovered by Iyo, reaching out to place a comforting hand on her shoulder. The touch did nothing to ease the rigidity of her posture, nor the tension in her jaw. If the Kiwi couldn't help, Rhea had no chance, so she kept her mouth shut and waited. "I won't either, for the record." Dakota agreed. "You can be a bonehead, but we love ya." The older woman's lips quirked, a shadow of a tease.

Rhea could take that, but the confidence of the words, that she was so sure Iyo shared the sentiment, wormed low in her stomach. "I didn't mean to make anyone choose." She murmured, her fingers playing at the edge of the blanket.

"You didn't." Iyo corrected firmly. "I needed to put my foot down a long time ago. I..." the words seemed to catch in her throat, the smaller woman's posture finally relaxing as her shoulders slumped. She was at a loss for words, eyes gaining the glazed over thoughtful look that Rhea had begun to recognize as a signal she was struggling to translate her thoughts.

It seemed that Dakota knew where she was going with it. To Rhea's

credit, she could also feel the conversation circling its way back to that strange, mysterious dynamic between Kairi and Iyo that had been hinted at before, but never fully laid out. "She needed the excuse. It's a good thing. Kairi's throwing a shit fit at us because it's easier than talking to Iyo about... things." Dakota finished lamely, casting an apologetic look Iyo's way.

Iyo just shrugged. "Soon." she promised, though Rhea knew not for what. She could barely tell whether it was meant to be directed at her, or Dakota, or both of them. The uncertainty of it weighed heavily on the Australian, weighing down her chest with a type of dread she hadn't felt since that summer, watching helplessly as Liv took everything from her.

"Okay," the Australian replied, the only thing she could say. She fished for some way out of the conversation, anything that would get them back to normalcy. Now was as good a time as any to figure out what the plan for the morning - just a few hours away - was. "You driving home with us, Kota?"

This time it was Dakota who lulled into an awkward, stricken silence. Something passed between the two Damage Ctrl members, an unspoken exchange of information, and then Dakota nodded firmly, "Sweet as, dude."

Rhea didn't need to look to know Iyo's eyes were on her, a warmth collecting across the back of her neck the way it always did. They'd be talking later, alone - but Rhea had postponed the inevitable, for at least one more day.

Heading home with three drivers was infinitely better than getting there with one, even if Iyo would only let Rhea drive for about an hour at a time. Rhea knew better than to push her luck, and was grateful for the opportunity to at least feel like she was contributing. Plus, driving was the only time she got to sit up front. Otherwise, Iyo and Dakota were otherwise juggling shotgun. It wouldn't have been fair to make Iyo sit in the back of her own car, and Rhea wasn't about to kick up a fuss about sitting next to Iyo while she drove at risk of Dakota shooting her any more suspicious eyebrow raises.

Because good lord, there were a lot of those.

It was during one of those rare spells of Rhea driving, just past sunset as they pushed past Savannah, that Dakota's phone rang from the back. The older woman's jaw all but dropped as she looked at the caller ID. "It's fucking Shayna."

"Oh," Iyo said, confusion and disgust creeping into her tone.

Rhea couldn't help but huff a laugh in agreement. "Weird time for your ex to hit you up," she added, her eyes flickering to the rear view mirror to check in on Dakota, just to catch her rolling her eyes.

Beside her, Iyo made a sound of faint surprise. "You know about that?"

Dakota leaned forward, her head poking up between the two front seats. "We had girl talk when we were drunk and miserable. I'm going to speaker phone this, please shut up."

"Do you two do this with all your calls?" Rhea teased, but said no more. So screw her, she was nosy. She'd have to bring it up again later though. For future reference, she'd want to know just how private her calls to the pair weren't.

Dakota answered, and immediately Rhea was left to wonder how the two women were ever together. Shayna's voice came through the other line, the tone of her voice immediately aggravatingly brazen. "Sup."

"The hell you mean, Sup? You called me, asshole." Dakota snapped, clearly not one to mince words with the Submission Magician. "Sup yourself."

Shayna scoffed. "Fine, fine. I'm just... wondering how you're doing, that's all. People are talking and wondering shit, and I just wanted to hear from the source." She sounded irritatingly defensive, considering she had been the one to really add fuel to the fire.

Dakota snorted, leaning back in her seat. "I don't feel like much of a chatty guy right now. You tell me what you're hearing, and I decide whether I'm gonna hang up." She crossed her arms, looking out the window at the passing cars.

Rhea kept her eyes focused on the road ahead, her jaw clenched tight. Shayna had always been a tough nut to crack. Hearing her on the back foot with someone as generally laid back as Dakota was something of a surprise. When it came to Damage Ctrl members, Rhea supposed, she and Shayna had one thing in common.

"Popular consensus is you were trying to screw Lyra out of the title. Now, she's not saying what she thinks one way or the other yet, but she sounds conflicted. Me though, I think it's too covert for you." Shayna explained, then overexplained, "Like we all remember the Tegan thing, you're not subtle. And Kairi seemed kinda unhinged even before Rhea clinched that loss. Tell her thanks for that, by the way."

Fuck you, Rhea mouthed at the phone laying on the console. Iyo covered her mouth to stifle her laughter, her dark eyes dancing with amusement. It was enough to soften the grim edge to the whole situation.

"I'm sure she'll tell you where to stuff it," Dakota responded dryly, before adding with a touch of worry in her voice, "What do you think Lyra thinks?" It was a brief flash of vulnerability. Shayna must've been expecting it, the other woman's voice softening.

"All I know is Sonya overheard the end of a conversation between her and Pearce, and she said she hadn't decided whether she's giving you a rematch." Shayna cleared her throat. "And I'm telling you this because even though you and I went sideways, I still respect the hell out of you. You can do better than Damage Ctrl, and you can have that title. Just gotta get some of that killer instinct back."

Rhea could see out of the corner of her eye as Iyo's expression shifted from amused to cold, spiralling into dangerous intensity. For just a brief second, Rhea took her attention off the road, reaching across the console to rest a hand on Iyo's leg. The vehicle drifted ever so slightly to the right, a horn sounding from a passing car in the next lane despite the fact that they never came close to colliding.

"Fuck!" The Australian swore, quickly correcting their course, squeezing down on Iyo's thigh as she did so. The Japanese woman let out a squeak of surprise herself, her hand darting to cover Rhea's, fingers curling around her hand to pull it away hurriedly.

"What the hell was that?" Shayna asked from the other side of the phone. "Who - am I on fucking speakerphone?!"

The three of them sighed in tandem, the moment broken. "Yes." Rhea confirmed, "And you're a fucking cunt, by the way. Like Dakota needs tips on instinct from someone too chickenshit to sweettalk her in public." People in glass houses, and all of that, but something about the way Shayna had tried to snake her way into Dakota's mind when she was at a low point rubbed her the wrong way. "Iyo and I better see

you in a ring real soon."

Shayna, to her credit, recovered smoothly. "Oh, I'm so scared. You come with so much backup - a bitch with a busted knee who's sulking about it on another continent; another recovering from a busted knee on this continent; one who's not about to trust any of ya anytime soon; and as for you two... one's not much to worry about, and the other's just an overreactive bodyguard. Everyone knows who they are in that equation? Cool. Here's the solution - you're all fucking losers."

Hung up on by angry submission artists, part 2. Rhea's left hand tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles turning white with the force of her grip.

"I don't know if we handled that the best way." Iyo mused quietly, still holding Rhea's right in the open air between them.

"No, that was pretty shit," Dakota agreed, staring at the two of them quizzically. "But maybe I ought to take over driving now, before we crash."

To say Iyo zonked out once they got home would be an understatement. It was late by the time Rhea rolled into her neighbourhood - the Australian less hesitant about returning her hand to Iyo's thigh once Dakota had been dropped off - and through the quiet comfort of the familiar streets, the older woman had started to nod off against the passenger seat window. She hadn't slept at all the previous night, and it had started to catch up to her, especially after the long drive.

She wasn't fully out when they pulled into the driveway, but the second she went to step out of the car, stumbling a little in exhaustion, Rhea was right there to scoop her up in her arms. Iyo could barely manage a tired grunt of protest before her head was tucked against the larger woman's shoulder, Rhea somehow juggling her while fishing around in her pocket for keys to the house. The last thing Iyo was aware of was the door swinging shut behind them, before she let herself drift off to the sound of Rhea's steady breathing.

The next time the older woman opened her eyes, she was tucked into bed. Her shoes were off, but otherwise she was still dressed in her

travel clothes, the black hoodie and leggings she'd changed into the previous day. On the bedside table, her phone was plugged in, and across the room the curtains were drawn against the light of day.

Rhea had carried her upstairs and put her to bed, leaving her to rest. It was a sweet gesture, and one that felt distinctly like being babied. Iyo wasn't about to complain - she could still feel the grogginess of sleep clinging to her, a reminder of how badly she needed the extra hours of rest.

With a quiet sigh, she reached for her phone. A couple of texts and emails from people she should eventually get back to, but that weren't a priority, and then - Kairi. Just one text, too tempting to ignore.

Princess 👑⚓📎

The doctor says I'll need a couple months to heal. I'm coming after Rhea once I do.

Iyo's heart sank, a tightness in her chest as she read and reread the words. All of this over a misplaced sense of jealousy? It didn't matter that Rhea hadn't been the one to cause the injury, or any of their other issues. She was a catalyst, a scapegoat for years of unresolved tension. And if that's all it took to shatter their decade-long friendship, then maybe Iyo was right to pull away.

Leave her out of it, this is between you and me.

She had meant for that to be it, a clear warning to Kairi not to involve Rhea in her grudge, but the second it was sent, three dots appeared at the bottom of her screen. Kairi was typing, and Iyo couldn't put her phone back on the nightstand.

Is it? You don't know how I feel.

Ironic. Sure, Iyo hadn't done the job of the good, doting best friend in being immediately there to comfort Kairi the way she wanted, but for years she had, even when Kairi hadn't returned the favour. Even when Kairi had ignored how transparently hurt Iyo was that she didn't. Years of Kairi, happy to share the highs with Iyo, but not the lows. She had thought she'd gotten over that, but now the anger was bubbling up in her again, and this time she wasn't going to let it go.

And you don't care how I feel.

The response was immediate, like Kairi had been waiting for the

chance to say it all along - the core of every one of their issues, unspoken and unresolved.

It's not my fault you're in love with me.

Rhea was in her study reviewing match footage when a quiet knock sounded at her door. She didn't bother pausing the video, but rather called out, "Come in!" from her desk.

It wasn't a room Iyo had been into yet. They hadn't clarified any boundaries or anything, but Rhea supposed to most people, closed doors suggested privacy. But Rhea just didn't like the feeling open doors gave her, and so her home had become a collection of closed doors that were all implicitly open to the Japanese woman.

She didn't enter, though. Odd.

Pushing herself to her feet, Rhea abandoned the computer to investigate, poking her head out the door to see Iyo standing there, face drawn into a cold, distant mask.

"Are you okay?" The Australian asked, already reaching out in preparation for the answer. One that came only with the tremble of Iyo's lip, tears spilling over in an instantaneous deluge. The smaller woman's shoulders sagged as she crumbled, sobbing hard and loud. Rhea caught her, pulling her close. A hand tangled in her hair, the other stroking her back, rubbing gentle circles through the thick hoodie she had slept in.

Rhea didn't ask any further questions. She didn't need to. It wasn't hard to imagine what might have triggered Iyo's breakdown. Instead, she just held her, guiding her slowly in the direction of comfort. Iyo had fistfuls of Rhea's shirt in her grasp, like the Australian might somehow run from her. As though she ever would.

"Up," was Rhea's only instruction, letting her hands rest on Iyo's hips to signal her intention. She waited until Iyo's arms wrapped tightly around her neck, before lifting the smaller woman up, arms slipping easily beneath her to carry her to Rhea's room. At this point, it was reflex, the weight of Iyo in her arms a welcome, comfortable presence.

She carried her all the way to the bed, Iyo still firmly in her grip when she shifted to lean back against the headboard, Iyo settled in her lap. The tremors wracking Iyo's body didn't cease, the Japanese woman still sobbing, her face buried in Rhea's shoulder. The Australian ran her fingers through the woman's long, bright hair, letting her cry it out. There was no rush - they were home, and safe.

Iyo's muffled voice came through, thick with emotion. "I'm sorry."

"Shh, don't be." Rhea murmured, pressing her lips to the top of her head in a gentle kiss. "You're okay. I'm not going anywhere."

The assurance was met with a faint sniffle. The older woman's arms tightened around her neck, drawing her impossibly close. "Kairi..." she whispered, as though speaking the name would summon the devil herself.

"I figured." Rhea replied. She didn't need to hear anything more to know that much. Iyo's history with Kairi was a landmine, one that Rhea had no idea how to navigate. One that she didn't need to. "You don't have to tell me anything until you're ready to. I'm just gonna hold you, okay?"

Iyo nodded, and they stayed there for what felt like hours, Iyo's tears staining Rhea's shirt. Eventually, the crying subsided, and she pulled back, looking up at Rhea with watery, red eyes, skin gone pale from the ordeal. She was a wreck, but still so beautiful, though Rhea was ashamed to think it.

"Hi," Rhea whispered, her hand raising to tuck a strand of Iyo's hair back behind her ear, her palm coming to rest against the woman's cheek. "Feeling a little better?"

The smaller woman leaned into the touch, her eyes drifting closed before she finally spoke again. "Thank you." A soft smile crossed her lips, and then she opened her eyes again, searching Rhea's face.

It wasn't hard to imagine what Iyo saw - a woman hopelessly and transparently carrying a torch for her. It felt impossible to hide it, but the timing was all wrong. Temptation roared in the Australian's ears, watching the curve of Iyo's lips, the dark flutter of her lashes, the warmth of her skin beneath her hand.

She could do it, could cross that line between them and kiss Iyo right then and there, but what kind of monster would that make her? To steal the breath from her lungs, the last bits of light from her eyes,

while the older woman was vulnerable and weak. And she'd let Rhea. But not necessarily because she could reciprocate. Because she had been shattered over something she didn't trust Rhea enough to talk about yet.

How could she even entertain such a thing?

Instead, Rhea just pressed another kiss to the top of Iyo's head, wrapping every emotion up and tucking it deep in her heart, where no one would unveil it. "I'm always here for you," she promised, to herself as much as to Iyo.

The titles, Rhea reminded herself. Then, and only then, would the timing be right.

Rhea would deserve her by then. She would make sure of that.

"Easy, killer." Rhea panted from behind the punching bag, her shoulders flexing as she struggled to absorb each of the blows that Iyo unleashed upon it. The Australian was a welcome, solid presence behind the equipment - the older woman had always enjoyed working with her, even if it wasn't in the ring.

"Sorry," Iyo apologized, backing off from the assault, giving them both a moment of reprieve. Rhea's eyes were twinkling with amusement at her apology, the taller woman stepping out to stretch out her arms. As a bit of distraction from the sight, Iyo slid out of the gloves, setting them down on the bench.

The whole week had gone by like that - training sessions, meals, and quiet, late nights spent together, just talking. There hadn't been a repeat of Iyo's breakdown, and Rhea had respected her silence when it came to Kairi. That didn't mean it wasn't hanging in the air between them. Iyo had to get her thoughts together. She had to be the one to address it, but it felt like a spot of bad luck before their first real match. They needed to be focused, especially Iyo, given she knew more likely than not Rhea would become a wildcard as soon as she stepped foot into a ring with Liv and Raquel.

Rhea finished up her stretching, reaching to grab her phone from the bench, "Booking confirmation - what do you think, they've got

standard doubles, but the suites with the good showers are queen or king only?" she asked, flashing the options to Iyo.

The Australian's nonchalance about the prospect of bed-sharing was mystifying, given she'd been giving Iyo a wide berth since that night, at least physically. It wouldn't have been so obvious, if not for Iyo's attempts to initiate something only to be met with polite deflection.

Not rejection, exactly, but a hand on Rhea's bicep went ignored, where before the touch would've been mirrored with a steadying grip on Iyo's elbow, as though to keep her close. It had to be centred around the Kairi situation, but every little swerve only made Iyo more nauseated at the prospect of telling Rhea the whole story. After all, Rhea's very refusals to reciprocate were a dead ringer for the ways Kairi could get cold and distant.

"Queen is fine." Iyo answered, trying to keep her tone casual. She missed the closeness dearly. "I sleep better next to someone."

That seemed to catch Rhea off-guard, coloured by surprise that wasn't well-concealed. "Yeah, me too I guess. Colorado does get cold." the younger woman warned, tapping on her phone to make the booking.

It was cold in Florida, too, but temperature had nothing to do with it.

Changerooms had never been an issue for Iyo, but there was something about sharing the space with Rhea before a match together that was making her nervous. The usual routine felt like it had changed somehow, the careful way that the taller woman avoided looking her way while they dressed in their gear, though they'd done the same without incident hundreds of times. Yet, the second Iyo's attention drifted elsewhere, she sensed her every move being tracked by Rhea.

Then Iyo would turn, and Rhea would be staring at her phone, or at an empty locker. Not looking at her at all, despite the heat on the back of Iyo's neck that would return a moment later.

Maybe it was in her head, but the tension was thick enough that even their makeup artists looked a little nervous. Like the calm before the storm, and one that was about to come crashing down on Iyo. She

could feel it.

"You look good." Rhea commented warmly, once they were all made up and just awaiting their cue to proceed into gorilla. Her eyes were finally on the Japanese woman again, a soft smile on the Australian's lips. Iyo could almost convince herself things were normal, like they had been before. She felt desperate for the comfort of her friendship with Rhea, and her hand reached out for the other woman's, squeezing tightly.

"So do you," Iyo agreed, taking in the bits of herself reflected in Rhea's gear. Licks of colour across leather, a new, brightly coloured armguard, a strip of cloth dangling from it. Subtle, but clear.

Rhea squeezed her hand back, lacing their fingers together like she, too, couldn't bear to let go.

"Hellooooooooo once, present, and future losers!" Liv's voice was shrill, piercing the hallway.

The Australian dropped Iyo's hand instantly, her head snapping to glare at Liv, who was prancing her way towards them. Her eyes were heavily lined in black, gear just as dark, as though calling back to the days she and Rhea had run together.

Oddly, Raquel was nowhere to be seen. "Where's your bodyguard?" Iyo asked, her voice cool. Rhea's eyes darted down to her, but she didn't say anything, her shoulders squared, the tension visible in every inch of her body. A coiled spring, ready to snap at the slightest provocation.

Liv flashed a leonine grin, her eyes bright. Though she responded, her answer was directed wholly at the towering goth. "We're not all as pathetically codependent as you two are." She stepped closer, her eyes narrowing as she looked Rhea over.

"The fuck does that mean?" Rhea demanded, her voice low.

The blonde lifted her chin, taking another step forward, only stopping when she was staring right up at Rhea's face. "Don't be sour. I'm glad you found yourself a little girlfriend - it was sad watching you be all totally lesbigay by your lonesome."

Iyo wasn't positive she was supposed to hear that, not by the way Liv murmured it, but then her eyes slid Iyo's way, cold and sharp. The same look she had been treated to after knocking Liv on her ass the

week prior - it felt like it carried the full depths of the blonde's disdain, like she had grown tired of having to breathe the same air as Iyo.

The Australian made a wounded sound, her shoulders slumping. It was a brief moment, uncharacteristic of the Eradicator, as much an admission as anything. Of course Liv would exploit any weak point she could. That itself bore no surprise. What did was that Rhea shrunk back, as if she were ashamed to be called out that way, like it was dirt worth being fearful of.

But it wasn't Rhea's reaction Liv was after. Her gaze was fixed on Iyo. Analytical, curious, deadly disturbing. Iyo wouldn't give her an inch to work with. This was the art of back halls and locker rooms. The bit of the business she loathed, but one she had learned in much more dangerous territories from deadlier forces than a washed up cheerleader.

Anything tumbling from Liv's mouth was meaningless, whatever kernel of truth it might carry filed away to be dealt with at a later time. Not here. Never here. Rhea didn’t seem to have the same capacity to carry on in spite of it. Guilt cloaked her, the taller woman's posture slumped, her face pale. The Eradicator was nowhere to be found, just her Rhea, shrunk into herself like a kicked dog.

"This won't help you win." Iyo responded, letting her voice drop into a threatening timbre.

Liv cackled. Honest to god cackled, as though their entire confrontation was a huge cosmic joke to her. "I don't have to win, I just have to outlast you two. I was serious, only an idiot would trust either of you. But hey, Iyo, if you end up stabbing Rhea in the back before she gets sick of you, let me know when and where so I can buy front row tickets." A cruel sort of amusement lit up her face, as though she knew she had won before they even truly began.

"She'd never-" Rhea began to protest, before the call of a producer down the hall interrupted their standoff.

"Queenslayer, Judgment Day, on in five, ladies!" The man barked.

"Aw, cute name. You think I'm a queen. Good luck, paupers." Liv turned away, a skip in her step as she waved over her shoulder at them. To her former tag partner, she shot a last warning, stunning the Eradicator back into silence. "Rhea, try to keep your eyes where they belong. I'd hate for you to get distracted."

With that, she disappeared down the corridor, leaving Iyo with a shell-shocked Rhea. The taller woman had a thousand-yard stare, confusion and guilt and fear written all over her face. She wasn't raring for a fight, ready to tear Liv and Raquel to pieces. The fire had been snuffed out of her eyes.

"Iyo, I'm..." Rhea's voice was small and uncertain, her words dying on her tongue. Iyo knew the feeling of shame well, but this wasn't the time for it. They had to get through this match, and that meant keeping Rhea on the offensive.

"Shut up. Don't listen to her," Iyo ordered, her voice firm. She clutched at Rhea's shoulder, squeezing enough that she knew it would hurt. Catharsis through pain. Victory through anger. A reminder of what Liv had done to her before, and would do again if Rhea didn't pull herself together. "Nothing outside the ropes matters."

In truth, she didn't believe that herself. It did. The hours spent outside the ring with Rhea mattered. They were why she had fallen for her so quickly in the first place, why Kairi hated the Australian so much. Why Liv had known exactly how to twist the knife, to render Rhea opaque, to ignite a blaze in Iyo that she wouldn't soon forget. Every bit of it mattered, but what she wanted to truly say in that moment, *nothing anyone else does will change the way I feel about you,* wasn't meant to lie in the shadow of cruelty.

So she held it in, and watched as Rhea's eyes darkened. The Eradicator steadily emerged from her exile, breaking the surface in a laboured struggle. The taller woman grabbed the back of Iyo's neck, a violent grip that was nothing like the affection she normally doled out. There was a callousness there, a possessive desperation. "You're right." Rhea agreed, her voice barely above a growl, "Let's fucking destroy her."

Watching Iyo blur into action - a streak of neon that tumbled around Liv like a cat toying with its prey - was thrilling. The two smaller women didn't have a wide depth of match history, but no one would ever be able to tell that by the way Iyo weaved through each of Liv's strikes. They were both deadly when near the ropes, but with someone of Liv's size, Iyo was more than comfortable taking to the middle of the ring, forcing Liv down to the mat with a type of savagery that was rarely seen from the Genius of the Sky.

Rhea was far from surprised. They'd spent serious time debriefing Liv's weaknesses. The little tendencies that Rhea had picked up on over the years, and her own experience with the blonde had been enough to provide Iyo with a solid playbook. It was one of their only true advantages, considering Raquel's own conflicts with Iyo had waned over the years to the point where the Genius of the Sky was still a wildcard against the Judgment Day. The worry didn't leave Rhea for long, though - as confident as she was in Iyo's abilities, their earlier argument with Liv weighed heavily on her mind.

For as well as she knew Liv's weaknesses, that was a two-way street, and for once, Rhea wasn't looking forward to getting into the ring with her. Not with Iyo's eyes on them. That impassivity of Iyo's had inflamed old, bone-deep insecurities just as gravely as Liv had, cloaking the future with dread. They'd need to talk about it. Rhea would have to fess up, at least in part, before Liv could make everything ten times worse.

Back in the ring, Liv had finally managed to stabilize, taking advantage of a sudden burst in Iyo's momentum with a sudden dropkick, sending the older woman crashing down. Ever the opportunist, Liv wasted no time in scooping her arm around the back of Iyo's neck, grabbing hold of her trunks to loft her into the beginning of the Three Amigos - only for Iyo to stay put exactly where she was, feet planted firmly on the ground. Her reversal was quick, using Liv's own hold against her, slipping behind the blonde and hauling her back into a bridged German suplex.

Before the count could even start, Iyo rolled over Liv, dragging her back into a second suplex - then a third. The last one, Iyo didn't let go, holding Liv tight against her, trapping the blonde in the pin. Liv slumped, ragged from the attack, but despite clearly struggling to do so, was able to get her shoulder up by the count of two.

Still, Rhea could barely contain her excitement. Violence was a thing of beauty, the only oasis she currently had. As much as the pathetic animal within her recoiled in fear at the prospect of stepping through those ropes, the other bit - the Eradicator - knew by instinct this was her time. She slapped a hand against the ringpost, calling to her partner gruffly, "Get her up, get her over here!"

Iyo obeyed seamlessly, hauling Liv towards their home corner. The tag against her back was mechanical, but the second Rhea felt the soft heat of Iyo's skin under her palm, she felt a part of her float back to the surface. The Eradicator sank back, and it was Rhea who climbed

in between the ropes.

Liv still had her senses about her, the changeover between partners just enough for her to get back to a fully vertical base, but not enough for her to gain the advantage. Rhea couldn't let any of Iyo's work go to waste. She closed the distance between them in seconds, grabbing Liv's wrist and whipping her out just far enough to haul her back in, clotheslining her back down to the mat. She was on top of the blonde before she could roll away, dragging her up again only to knock her right back down. Once, twice, three times, before grabbing hold of Liv once more and lifting her clear overhead into a delayed vertical suplex.

The blonde made a lovely, pathetic sound in Rhea's ear as the Australian held her, suspended above the ground in a display of power and dominance that earned the crowd's awe. Iyo's voice was in her ear, too, her presence felt at the corner of the ring, reminding Rhea of the ultimate goal - to win, to destroy, to dominate.

She backed her way up, feeling the satisfying slap of Iyo's hand against her shoulder, spinning her way back around with great leisure. They'd planned this - a good, solid combination that would ensure Liv would feel it for the foreseeable future. Iyo bounded up the corner, up and up again, leaping clear over Rhea's head, boots colliding with Liv's stomach in the same moment that Rhea tipped into the suplex. The ring thumped with the force of the three colliding into the mat in tandem.

Raquel shouted from her side of the ring, desperate for action, but she'd be denied for a while longer.

Rhea rolled clear quickly enough to watch Iyo bound up the ropes again. The Genius of the Sky's arms swept out over the crowd, and then she was airborne again - but anyone would be a fool to count Liv Morgan out so soon, her boots raising to catch the woman, to send her tumbling just as she had the last time the two faced.

Iyo was no fool, and she had learned. She landed on her feet, grabbing hold of Liv's legs. She was a woman possessed, the thrill of the crowd's cheers setting her face into that gleeful, hyperfocused expression that Rhea couldn't help but adore.

Who could really say what Rhea found more attractive between that boundless joy, and the way the joshi manhandled Liv up into an underhook facebuster like it was nothing? Who could say when it all

added up to Iyo Sky, a goddess in the ring and out. This was the best seat on the house, a front row view of the woman she loved putting her greatest enemy to the mat.

Raquel had to go and ruin that, though. The second Liv was down, she stormed into the ring, deceptively fast for her size. Launching herself atop the smaller women at the count of two. Again.

The bruiser of the Judgment Day was not one to underestimate. The second she returned to her side of the ring, Liv scrambled for her - Rhea reaching out automatically to allow Iyo the same courtesy. After so long in the ring, the last thing Rhea was going to do was let a fully rested Raquel at her.

Rhea met Raquel halfway, the Eradicator seeping back in with every punch taken and dealt, a vicious cycle of violence that made her blood sing with joy. It wasn't often that she could fight at that pace with someone who could match her in brute strength, someone who didn't try to duck and weave and connive.

Raquel was a fighter, and while she could try to adapt to Liv's game, she would never truly be anything other than herself. A transparent opportunist, always getting in the way of Rhea and what she wanted most. The rest of the world fell away to that narrow focus, all the anger of years, spiralling back to the start of it all. A moment in time when that desire had been Iyo. It had always, always been Iyo.

But Raquel had learned more than Rhea gave her credit for, because the second the Eradicator barreled down for a running lariat, the taller woman tripped her into the ropes. Distantly, Rhea heard the tag out called, spinning just in time to catch sight of Liv Morgan - bruised and battered - coming for her.

Did she really think Oblivion would be enough? That Rhea wouldn't see the finisher coming? No, she wasn't going to fall for the same fucking trick. Not then. Not ever again.

She caught Liv, wrapping an arm around the ropes to stabilize herself when the blonde tried to slam her down into the mat. The muscles in her stomach flexed, tense from adrenaline, a snarl curling her lip as she glared down at the woman in her grasp, before blowing her one last, mocking kiss. Liv's eyes widened in recognition, a split second before Rhea lifted her into a powerbomb, slamming the smaller woman down into the mat.

There was nothing in the world that could get between her and

pinning Liv fucking Morgan.

"Rhea!" Iyo's voice cut through the rushing of blood in her ears, and she jerked her head up to see a disaster of their own making - three familiar women jumping the barricades and sliding into the ring, and Raquel on her feet, backing Iyo into the corner. Pure Fusion Collective wasted no time of their own circling Rhea, Liv grinning up maniacally at her.

"Before you ask, no, I didn't plan this." The blonde snarked, right before Shayna dove onto Rhea.

Five against two weren't odds she'd normally be afraid of - but circumstances being what they were, the Eradicator went into a wild panic the second Shayna's arm wrapped around her throat. All she could think of was the sound Kairi had made when her wrist snapped, and the deep seated part of her that hoped she'd never have to see Iyo in those same circumstances. Then, the memory of her own pains - a shoulder against concrete, a bat to the face, a heart broken twice with a single kiss. Liv's laughter echoed in the depths of Rhea's mind, even as the sleeper hold started to take effect.

Dakota's music hit.

Shayna's grip slackened for only a fraction of a second, but that's all Rhea needed to slam an elbow back into the Submission Magician's ribs. It wasn't a pretty break, far from textbook - but she managed to slip the hold and scramble away, swinging wildly to build any space she could. There wasn't much to be had. The silver lining was, Liv hadn't lied.

She was cackling like a crazy person, but it was only because Sonya had her pinned to the mat, fists colliding with Liv's face and stomach with abandon between bursts of maniacal laughter, while Raquel, Iyo, and Zoey were locked in a three-way standoff. Each one of them seemed to be weighing the risk between engaging in an all-out brawl or turning their backs to come to the aid of their respective partners - but the arrival of Dakota through the ropes seemed to settle that once and for all.

Pandemonium erupted.

Sometime between the point Dakota came in for backup and officials stormed the ring, Iyo had lost complete track of Rhea. They'd all been hauled off in different directions, the ugly three-way dispute finally broken apart. The last thing she remembered Rhea doing was grabbing a handful of Raquel's hair and hauling her off of Iyo, and then - well, then Iyo had treated Shayna to an armbar for the sake of pettiness, and the rest was a wash.

"Have I ever mentioned I don't know why I ever ran with her?" Dakota groaned, stretching her arms out while they made their way out to the parking bay. Her knuckles were bruised and split, but she was mostly unmarred otherwise.

Trailing a bit behind, Iyo worked a kink out of her neck. The statement was vague enough, but there were only so many women Dakota could mean. "Raquel?"

The Kiwi made a sound of affirmation. "Yeah. No wonder it took til now for Rhea and I to get on the same page. Speaking of, though..," She trailed off, slowing her pace to walk alongside Iyo, a curious expression on her face.

Iyo tilted her head, looking up at Dakota incredulously. "No."

"Don't think I didn't notice her feeling you up right in front of me in the car last week," the taller woman countered. "Shoot your shot."

A flush crept up the Japanese woman's neck. "...I think you were right," she admitted, her fingers playing with the strap of the bag slung over her shoulder, just for the sake of having something to do with her hands. "About her liking women. But it didn't seem like she wanted me to know." It was the closest Iyo would get to admitting the full depth of things. She hadn't put much stock in Liv's taunts, but the way Rhea had reacted to her made her question everything, and Dakota was one of the very few people she felt comfortable talking to about it.

Dakota tilted her head to the side, surveying the lot. "She's freaked out."

"Her stuff was gone. Her car's gone." Iyo confirmed, the pit of her stomach churning. It didn't look good. The only upside was in knowing where Rhea would be. Their hotel was the only reasonable place she could have gone. "Is it me?" She wondered aloud.

Ever since their night on the road together, that thought had been

troubling Iyo. Her feelings were steady and unflinching, but Rhea was not so consistent. One moment, she'd be looking right back at Iyo with a sparkle in her eye, the next she was pulling away from Iyo's touch, only to slink back soon after to seek the type of validating affection that Iyo fruitlessly hoped meant something. But she wasn't sure how much of that was real, and how much was coincidence, or imagined on her part.

And there was the fact Rhea had apparently been more open with Dakota on the subject of her sexuality than she had been with Iyo. That was a bitter pill to swallow. The only reason Iyo knew anything about it at all was from Liv's insidious little reveal - otherwise she would still be woefully in the dark.

"I think you just need to talk to her." Dakota assured. "Liv's got her head all messed up, there's probably reasons she hasn't brought it up. You gotta think of it like this, I only had an inkling because I trauma dumped all over her. And we were drunk."

The comment was lighthearted, but it only made Iyo's stomach sink further. She didn't want to have to pry Rhea open, forcing her into a conversation. It had to be Rhea's choice, or else Iyo would never forgive herself. She wouldn't be able to live with knowing she had pushed the younger woman like that.

But something in Dakota's words rang true, too. Trust brokered trust, and Iyo couldn't bring herself to judge Rhea for hiding parts of herself away when she'd spent the better part of a decade keeping her own secret.

"You think I should tell her about Kairi," Iyo stated, the words falling flatly between them.

Dakota led the way to her rental, opening the back door for Iyo to dump her bags in before doing the same. "Man, even I don’t know the full Kairi sitch, so I'm not going to tell you that you gotta if all you want is to tag with her," She leaned against the side of the car, considering her words carefully, expression thoughtful. "But if you do want something else, honesty is better sooner than later."

With that, Iyo climbed into the car, mind made up.

Tonight, she'd tell her. Then, she'd figure out if she wanted to risk her heart again.

Not a single part of Rhea had meant to bolt, but the second she had gotten hauled into the back and Iyo was nowhere in sight, everything had spiralled. Outside the ropes *did* matter, so long as she was no longer in the ring. The world didn't go away, and all of Liv's taunts had come rushing back.

The blonde airing her dirty laundry was one thing, but letting it get to her so obviously was another. Denying it at that point was fruitless. All Rhea could think of was that stupid hotel room she had booked. Why had she even offered up a choice? Every other moment spent in such close proximity to Iyo had been a coincidence. Something explainable - even the night she fell asleep pressed to Iyo's back would have been recoverable.

She should've just booked the double beds. At least that would've afforded them the space to deal with Liv's cruel admission. The anxiety of what Liv might say or do next hung like a guillotine over Rhea's neck. Every one of her interactions with Iyo had become potential ammunition, and the only cure was to excise herself from the woman before it was too late.

By the time she could rationally think any of it through, she was speeding to the hotel, heart in her throat.

Forget everything else, Rhea had to make damn sure Iyo knew that not a single part of their recent alliance came with ulterior motives. She didn't know how much time she had when she stormed to the front counter, demanding a second room. She couldn't stop to muse over which one of the sweaters cast on the floor was hers, and which was one Iyo had stolen. She only knew she had one brief window of opportunity to avoid facing the music.

It was once inside the tiny economy room she'd managed to threaten the concierge into giving her that she truly fell apart. The world's eyes had been on her for far too long. She could barely tell where the lines between Rhea Ripley and the rest began. Usually the weak woman beneath emerged as the makeup was wiped away. Tonight, she tore the second face off with her anguish, tears stealing away eyeliner and mascara until nothing remained except the humiliating evidence of her humanity. The Eradicator fought to scrub that away too - it would not go. The more she stared at herself in the mirror, the more the ghosts of the past transformed into haunting, corporeal beasts.

The most terrifying of which wore Iyo's cold, blank expression.

The sound of the door jarred her. She wheeled slowly, desperately hoping for a confused stranger to come strolling in - some double booking gone awry due to the staff's rush to find Rhea another room. In walked that same beast. A tiny, redhaired monster, toting a bag of forgotten toiletries alongside her.

Rhea was going to kill that concierge if it was the last thing she did. "How the fuck -" she bit out accusatorily before she could stop herself.

Iyo's eyebrows flickered up. A momentary weakness, powerful enough to stop Rhea dead.

"I'm sorry." The smaller woman deflated, the bag sliding down to her side. She retreated as though burned, the words tumbling out laboured, like Rhea had stolen every bit of language from her with just one hasty threat. "I... needed to talk to you. Not... I... I'll leave."

Rhea could only watch the woman turn, helpless to the impulse to chase her. She had to fix it. Had to put things back in their proper boxes. Before she knew it, she had cut Iyo off at the pass, standing between her and the door out of the room, desperate to salvage what could be had. The Australian felt small despite towering over Iyo, a dark shadow that closed her off from retreat.

The Japanese woman's eyes were wide, pupils dilated, the line of her mouth pressed together. Her hands, now empty, folded together. The very action seemed to make Iyo shrink, shoulders curling in. For the first time, perhaps ever, she seemed afraid of Rhea, a sight that turned her stomach. That was the last thing Rhea had ever wanted.

How must it have looked, to run as she had, only to curse at and block off her partner's way out?

"I'm bisexual," erupted from Rhea's mouth before she could lose the nerve, followed by the immediate thought that she'd fucked everything up, again. That Iyo might immediately see all their past interactions through a different lens, like admission of one thing was proof of guilt in another. The sight of Iyo's face schooling itself back into that torturous, blank expression she had worn while dealing with Liv worsened everything. Rhea couldn't even blame her, the whole thing sounded a hair's breadth away from a tortured, conflicted come-on. At the heart of it all, it was. She could feel her wounds coming unsutured, words flooding from her mouth as verbal gore, "I just wanted to be truthful so you didn't think... I mean, nothing Liv said

had anything to do with us. She's... I... You're not... - nevermind, it doesn't matter, just forget I-"

"Did you see Mayu kiss me, many times?" Iyo interrupted, as brusque as a freight train.

Rhea froze, her mind whirling to catch up, anxiety turning her stomach inside out and then back again.

Frankly, yes, she had. On two different occasions, at that. The one which always came to mind was Iyo's sendoff before being signed to the WWE, full of respectful ceremony and flowers and yes, Mayu, bowling Iyo over with her enthusiasm. Rhea hadn't ever thought it meant much, considering all the cultural differences at play. For all she knew, that was a part of a marketing schtick.

But Iyo was still staring at her expectantly in that controlled, restrained way. Without any clear idea where the conversation was leading, it was all Rhea could do to nod.

"Did you see the times I kissed her?"

Subconsciously, Rhea was taking the junk drawer in her brain labelled *Things I know about Iyo* and dumping it all on the floor, because no. No she hadn't. The world seemed to start restructuring around the statement, tiny pieces of information that had once been ignored, suddenly filed away as critically important details. Still, Rhea couldn't risk making a wrong assumption. It could be that Iyo was only meaning to convey that she wasn't shy about affection, or wasn't homophobic - as obvious as that might have already been - or, anything else at all that Rhea was missing.

So she broached the topic as gently as she could think to. "Was that... business or personal?"

The smaller woman tilted her head as if thinking of how to answer that, pacing away, only to settle down on the edge of the bed. "Both? It's different there, the lines get blurry," she explained slowly but clearly, taking her time to pick through everything in her head. Rhea didn't push. "Women aren't as shy with each other. We have public baths, and practice couples at all-girls' schools. Kissing can show affection, or be for attention. Most of the time, the kiss meant something different to me than it did to them."

Her voice was neutral and informative, but it still felt like she was holding something back as she trailed off, staring down at her hands.

Rhea settled on the bed next to her, close enough to touch, but far enough to be deniable.

When Iyo continued, her voice had taken on a depth Rhea had only recently become acquainted with. Teetering on the edge of emotion. Too afraid to push her over, Rhea sat stock still and listened. "Sometimes the people who see things as just business are the ones that become the most important."

"Kairi," Rhea breathed, realization washing over her, every piece of the puzzle falling into place. "She's..." The words caught in her throat.

Iyo looked up at Rhea, eyes glassy. "My best friend. To her, I'm family, but for me, she is my heart." She admitted softly, hand reaching out to brush Rhea's, an offer more than anything. "You don't have to tell me anything you aren't ready for. But please don't be scared of me." Iyo pleaded, her voice cracking on the final word, hand retracting.

Rhea didn't hesitate to catch her wrist, hauling the entire small woman in with it. Iyo tumbled against her, not a second of protest between that and the arms winding their way around her, clutching her tight. Rhea could feel the wetness of her tears on the bare skin of her throat, a mirror of the tears suddenly spilling from her own eyes. "What did she say to you, Iyo?"

A soft, broken laugh escaped Iyo's lips, muffled against Rhea's skin. "I don't think you want to know. It was almost as bad as what Liv said to you."

Rhea's grip tightened. If she had known, she wouldn't have rested until she had finished what Shayna started. Bloody murder flashed in her mind, calmed only by the soft curve of Iyo's body pressed to her, hands absently playing with the hem of Rhea’s shirt, touch featherlight.

"Liv is my ex, for the record." Rhea confessed, not wanting there to be anything left unsaid between them. "So she's just being a regular bitch, not a super bitch. Dom knows, obviously, but I'm not sure that Raquel does." She added, a shudder rolling down her spine as the reality of the situation caught up to her.

The smaller woman hummed, pulling back far enough that they could see each other's faces. "I am sorry I scared the staff into giving me a key to your room." Her tone was sheepish, an embarrassed blush on her cheeks that made Rhea's heart thump painfully.

"You're going to have to tell me how you managed that," she teased. "I didn't mean to run from you," Rhea admitted, reaching up to stroke a strand of hair out of Iyo's face. While she was out of her gear, she hadn’t showered, makeup and bits of ring grime still coating her. It didn’t make her any less beautiful. "I just needed time to think."

"Do you still need time?" Iyo asked, her voice low, brown eyes searching.

"Yes," Rhea replied honestly, thinking of all that she yearned to say and do, and all the ways pursuing that then wasn’t right. "But I'd rather have it with you, if that's okay."

Iyo smiled, the world becoming a brighter place for it once more. "That's okay with me," she agreed, her head tilting to the side, a sudden glimmer of mischief in her eye. "My room is too big for one anyway."

Nothing changed. And everything did.

Realistically, Rhea's interactions with Iyo had already been toeing the line of too close, too friendly, too intimate. If anything, Iyo had only become more comfortable in their shared space. There seemed to be no secrets between them, and while it was liberating to know that, it was also maddening to see it in action. Because Iyo had become really, *really* comfortable.

As in, Iyo saw no qualms in strolling through the house in nothing but a towel after showering on the days she forgot to bring a clean set of clothes in with her - which had become nearly every day. Not that Rhea was complaining, because complaint equaled admission of guilt, and it was bad enough when a fully clothed Iyo caught her staring.

Which also happened nearly every day, right around the time they'd head into the gym together. They'd go through their individual routines, and then Rhea would help Iyo with weight training, where damn near her entire purpose was in spotting the woman and analyzing her form. That meant watching the flex of every muscle in her shoulders and back, watching her reps with the leg press, watching her do squats, watching her watch Rhea.

She never said anything about it, but afterward, when Iyo helped Rhea stretch out, the way she touched her felt like an interrogation, its own beautiful form of hell. It didn't even take much. Just a firm hand across Rhea's collarbone, easing her fucked shoulder through a slow rotation, and her mind was gone, body just as confused at what was happening to it.

Even in the ring, Iyo had begun to test her. They continued to try to shore up their weak points, ring control being the name of the game. Which meant plenty of time dedicated to Rhea grabbing Iyo back from an empty home corner, trying to keep her immobile on the mat while Iyo used every trick in the book to try to escape. Which meant a lot of time spent with Iyo wriggling around in her grasp, and a lot more time with her own back on the mat, staring up at the ceiling, Iyo's weight atop her and their faces centimetres apart. The smaller woman was infuriatingly good at reversals, and Rhea felt like she was learning nothing except for that she should never wrestle Iyo one-on-one if she could help it.

Fortunately, Rhea still had the benefit of private space in her home, and that meant she could struggle not to implode in peace.

It wasn't Iyo alone that was the problem. Realistically, Rhea could deal with that if she had any other outlet for her stress, but without the catharsis of getting a good, clean win over someone, her aggression was only mounting. That didn't look like it was about to change anytime soon, either - with PFC's interference, they'd managed to worm their way into a three-on-three match alongside Dakota. The odds of Rhea getting some of the pent up aggression out through pinning anyone were abysmal at best.

Despite everything, Rhea was channeling sane and normal vibes. She'd done a great job of not being terribly weird and handsy with Iyo in public. Even during their singular practice match with Dakota - who had taken to staring at the both of them with a dubious, knowing look that spiked Rhea's heartrate - she'd managed to keep it professional. Her tag chemistry with Dakota, on the other hand? Abysmal. ANZAC would be ashamed of them. Rhea might have even found herself troubled by it, if not for the fact she had a very pretty, very distracting joshi in her corner who was doing a fantastic job of making up the difference.

It was nice, almost, being able to watch Dakota and Iyo do their thing. They were two-time tag champs for a reason, the selfless dynamic between the pair a thing of beauty. Rhea was a little jealous, to tell

the truth, of how easy it looked. She and Iyo had come a long way in their own work together, but there were still seams, more like two individuals with a vested interest in protecting one another than a true team. They didn't work in synchrony, but rather in response. Emotions weaselled their way into every movement, powerful but easily exploited in a way that a tag team shouldn't be.

"Kairi's out of the apartment, by the by," Dakota broached over dinner. The three of them had holed up in a local dive, somewhere far enough from the PC to avoid getting hassled, as close to privacy as they could get. "Don't know where she's at, but Toast is with her."

"Toast?" Rhea asked, eyebrows furrowed, midway through hacking up her steak into tiny bloody pieces.

Iyo's face fell into a frown, fork suspended in the air with a cherry tomato speared on the end. She set it down with a clatter. "Our cat."

"Shit, I didn't know." Rhea set her own knife and fork down, reaching out to put her hand on Iyo's forearm. "You could've brought him, we would've figured out the dogs."

On the other side of the booth, the Kiwi watched the interaction with a calculating expression on her face. Rhea could see the wheels turning behind her eyes. There was no question that she could tell Rhea was into Iyo, so she could only hope that their weird sorta-friendship was solid enough to keep Dakota from pointing it out. They might only be cool because Iyo could bridge the gaps, but there was such a thing as bro code.

"I think she needs company." Iyo's voice pulled Rhea from her thoughts. Even with Kairi flirting the line between cold war and nuclear, Iyo still cared enough to worry about her. There was a part of Rhea that wondered if she'd ever be able to feel that way about Dom and Liv again. The other part of her hoped that Iyo never got to that point with Kairi.

"I'm gonna grab some drinks, you want anything?" Dakota asked suddenly, scooting out of the booth with a pointed look at Rhea. She had a bad feeling about this.

"I'm fine," the Australian demurred, Iyo echoing her dissent with a shake of her head. The second the other woman was gone, Iyo rounded on her, the frown on her face making Rhea's stomach churn.

"You got that, right?" The Japanese woman inquired, eyebrows

furrowed.

"What?" Rhea blinked down at Iyo, panic surging. If she had clued in through Dakota's weird facial expressions -

"She wants to know if I'm moving back in," Iyo clarified. "But she doesn't want to ask."

Oh, thank fuck. Rhea felt her heartrate drop back to a reasonable pace, a sudden laugh bubbling from her lips, the relief palpable. "Well I'm not going to die if you do," she assured Iyo. "But I would miss your cooking."

The smaller woman's eyes narrowed, an amused smile curving up the edges of her mouth. "Your fridge was so sad before me."

"Guilty." Rhea laughed, her thumb rubbing over the back of Iyo's arm. "Point is, do what you want, and I'll try not to be heartbroken over it."

A thoughtful look crossed Iyo's face, her gaze dropping to her food. For a second, it looked like she was going to say something, only for the moment to pass and the woman to dig back into her salad. "I think you need someone to make sure you eat enough vegetables. Can't live on protein shakes."

Rhea stared, a flush slowly creeping up her neck. She could feel the heat on the tips of her ears, her vision narrowing to Iyo's smile, the curve of her eyes, the slight dimple in her cheek.

Suddenly, her guest room was no longer a guest room. It was Iyo's, and it was going to stay that way.

Zoey's dropkick would've been absolutely devastating had it landed against its intended target. One moment, Dakota was being barrelled down with sniper-like precision, and the next, both her and Rhea were on the mat. Where the instinct to bodyblock the hit had come from, Rhea had not a clue, but Iyo cleaned up after them nicely. She was off like a bolt, scurrying up the ropes, springing out onto the floor to take out Shayna and Sonya, who would've been in position to follow up on Zoey's attack.

By the time Zoey got back to her feet, Dakota had recovered enough to meet her head on. Rhea slipped smoothly out of the ring, all the carefully practiced rhythm of war having gone out the window the second Sonya had taken out the ref. Strictly speaking, the two inside the ropes were the legal participants anyway, and she was of more use on the floor, not that Iyo needed backup. The woman moved like water, flowing effortlessly around one of Shayna's kicks, twisting around the submission magician and throwing her head-first into the steel steps, the resounding clang echoing over the crowd's cheers. Rhea was on Sonya in a flash, already ready to pounce on Iyo in the followup.

Instead, she got her arms bound behind her back, and a boot to the back shoving her to the floor. Rhea stood atop her, glancing over at Iyo to find her playing to the crowd, waving an arm around in the air. The Japanese woman caught her eye, a smile on her face, Rhea's heart hammering with exhilaration that had nothing to do with the match. Iyo was breathtaking under the lights, so much more vibrant and alive than the woman she had found cornered in a boardroom weeks ago, all for doing just that - daring to shine.

Inside the ring, the ref was stirring, Dakota and Zoey weaving around one another in a test of agility that ended with an echoing headbutt from the Kiwi, hoisting her up in a fireman's carry. Sonya grabbed at Rhea's ankle at the same time she rolled to her side, throwing the Australian off-balance long enough to scramble to her feet. Rhea let loose a curse, loud enough for Iyo to turn and notice the predicament they were in - Sonya up and rushing towards her, Shayna already back on her feet and lumbering back to the apron.

The moment suspended herself, the choice between saving Iyo from a spear, or ensuring Dakota's finisher would land. Rhea would have chosen Iyo every time, but the Eradicator instead met Shayna at the pass, hauling her off the apron. The second she did, she heard Iyo's yelp, the sound of bodies colliding with the barricades jarring.

She had little time to contend with her decision, Dakota landing GTK with gusto. The dazed ref crawled his way into position, the crowd chanting along to the count of one, two, three. The bell rang, Shayna fighting Rhea's strength with technique in vain. Let her reverse the hold all she wanted, the match was theirs - all that mattered anymore was ensuring Iyo was okay.

The distraction was what Shayna needed, but she had distractions of her own - the Submission Magician drawn to the sight of Dakota's arm

held high by the ref inside the ring, cheers erupting. Rhea shoved Shayna away, the grip they had on each other breaking only because they both had more important things to contend with.

With Dakota's victory music blaring and the cameras focused on her, Rhea was free to slip around to the other side of the ring. Sonya had Iyo in a chokehold, one arm twisted behind her back and pinned. The Japanese woman's face was oddly unconcerned despite her predicament, a fact that Rhea filed away for later consideration as she wrenched the Jersey Devil off of Iyo, shoving her in the direction of Shayna, who had just managed to collect Zoey from the mat.

"Thanks," Iyo said, her voice slightly hoarse. She didn't get the chance to respond, Dakota slipping out of the ring to stand alongside them, a satisfied grin on her face as they faced down the more sullen three women they had, at last, resoundingly defeated.

The end of an era, perhaps not just for Damage Ctrl. But Rhea knew better than anyone else that the past always came back to bite in the end.

Iyo didn't take offense to Rhea's decisionmaking, proven firmly by how the smaller woman bounded into Rhea's arms the second the three of them were backstage. It was a hug Rhea had been waiting to receive since the second the bell rung, a tension that had held her entire body taut breaking with the contact, despite the embarrassment of Dakota's knowing gaze. Iyo's legs locked around Rhea's waist, her face tucked into the taller woman's shoulder, and everything was perfect. They had won, Iyo was safe, and Dakota had gotten the glory that was rightfully hers.

"Good work out there," Rhea praised the Kiwi, adjusting her hold on Iyo, her hands sliding to the backs of her thighs. "Knew you had that."

Iyo squirmed to get comfortable, echoing Rhea's sentiment cheerfully. "I have to watch the replay, I couldn't see, but it sounded beautiful."

"Chur, you two kept the others clear. Didn't think you'd take that dropkick for me, Ripley." Dakota grinned.

"Yeah well," Rhea shifted. Iyo's weight was easy to handle, but the

warmth of her breath across her collarbone was distracting, the press of her body against Rhea's a little too much. "Instincts did their thing." She settled on, not sure how much of Dakota's statement was a tease. Rhea Ripley was not becoming a softie.

Dakota laughed at that. "Thanks anyway, man." She said, turning to make her own way back to the locker room. "Catch you lovebirds later, yeah?"

"Fuck off." Rhea muttered, but there was no bite behind it, not when Iyo's hands were laced around her neck, grumbling her own discontent at the implication before Dakota could get out of earshot.

"Are we staying for the show?" Iyo asked, once they were alone in the hall, head lifting to make eye contact with Rhea.

The close proximity made Rhea's stomach tighten with want. Now that the distraction of the match was behind them, those same instincts that had assisted her within the ring were making themselves apparent in a much more dangerous way. Heat coiled where it shouldn't, seeking the outlet it hadn't been given. A pin, one way or another. Something Rhea hadn't given into for months.

"I think I'd rather get back," Rhea suggested, her voice coming a little deeper. Iyo's attention was intense at the best of times, and Rhea could swear the woman knew exactly how she was looking at her. "Shower up, review the match together, sneak out for fast food?" She suggested, the moment growing dangerous enough to warrant an addendum to her plans. Anything to keep from thinking of the soft skin of Iyo's thighs under her fingertips, how easy it would be to carry her back to the locker room and chase away the ache.

"Perfect," the smaller woman agreed, her own fingers slipping to play with the baby hair at the base of Rhea's neck. The sensation sent an immediate shiver down her spine, the touch feeling more proprietary than strictly necessary.

Was it all a trick of her mind, or was Iyo's voice a little deeper, her eyes a little darker, the flush on her cheeks a little stronger than it had been right after the match? She could only hope that her own desire was well-hidden, her hands slipping down to the backs of Iyo's knees, a safer hold. Even still, Rhea had to wonder.

The only way to be sure was to ask, or to take. And Rhea didn't know which was worse.

The water pressure was great, hammering the tension out of Rhea's muscles. Steam clung to the glass of the shower door, obscuring everything beyond. If she strained her ears, she could just barely hear Iyo moving around the hotel room beyond, could see the older woman working her way through her post-match stretches in her mind's eye. Adrenaline was still simmering under the surface of Rhea's skin, her blood flowing hot and eager.

Before Iyo, this whole process was different. She would return to her room just long enough to throw on some halfway presentable clothes before hitting the city. A dingy bar, usually. Sometimes a club. Anywhere she could find someone to scratch the itch. It was different now. She very much didn't want to initiate that conversation. *Hey, Iyo, great working with you and like I said, you're always welcome to room with me whenever, I enjoy it a lot, actually - but I get super bloody pent-up after matches and I really just need to get off so I'm gonna ditch you now to go find someone to fuck.*

Or she could just not explain, and sneak out after Iyo went to sleep - but then what the hell would she say if the Japanese woman noticed? She couldn't very well pretend to have gone out to get a midnight snack. Record showed she was terrible at lying to Iyo anyway. So -

Rhea's hand trailed down her abdomen, lingering just below her belly button, debating. Getting herself off would work. Not ideal, but she could function, given how few other options she had. She'd have to be quick about it, and quiet, but she didn't have much other choice. Decision made, she leaned forward against the shower wall, closing her eyes and letting the water wash over the back of her neck.

Her thoughts turned, trying to find a fantasy, some memory. Something to make this go by fast. She racked her brain for past trysts, but found nothing appealing. The swathe of perky blondes in her past were more maddening than tempting now; Dom was - well, Dom; and all the others were too unnoteworthy to be of any use to her.

Stimulation alone would have to be enough. Frustrated, Rhea's hand slid further down her body, skimming along tension-slicked folds to find the friction her body craved. Her pulse pounded beneath her fingertips, but no matter how firmly she dragged her fingertips across

her clit, nothing more than a low thrum of pleasure built.

Rhea bit back a noise of aggravation. She didn't have time for this. Her other hand snuck up to tease her nipple, finding it stiffened from arousal, pinching it hard and twisting, imagining a mouth, all red lips and ivory teeth, working its way across her flesh. Better, that was better. The Australian's canines sunk into her lower lip, trying to work herself up enough to come before Iyo could start to wonder at her shower taking longer than usual. Already, she was thinking of excuses - her sore muscles after the match needing a long soak. That could work.

Of course, the smaller woman was the type to offer up a massage in the name of being helpful, and Rhea didn't trust herself to not absolutely blow it with how touch-starved she'd become without the release of a good lay. The last thing she needed was Iyo's hands on her, drifting down her shoulders and back, down across her sides... down...

Fuck.

Rhea tried to redirect her brain. Anyone else, anyone at all, but her imagination had no interest. It had already taken shape in the darkness behind her closed lids, painting an image of soft hands slipping along her form. The imagined ghost mouth taking the shape of Iyo’s own, her clever grin, crescent moon eyes full of glee summoned by the depths of Rhea’s mind. She couldn't help the moan that escaped her throat, her own fingers circling faster against her clit, chasing a sensation she couldn't quite get to. Her brain was hyper-focused on it now, on Iyo - and once it settled, Rhea knew the thought wouldn't leave her mind for quite a while. But if she could just get off, then she could at least try to move forward and pretend it was just a fluke that meant nothing.

She slipped two fingers inside of herself, the fantasy of Iyo falling to her knees playing out behind her eyes, imagining what her tongue would feel like against her skin, playful nips and kisses being left in Iyo’s wake.

"God-" She gasped out, curling her fingers inside of her cunt, her thumb pressing hard against her clit.

It was wrong, but the image of Iyo, soft hands and warm saliva against her was so vivid, Rhea had a difficult time remembering exactly why this was such a terrible idea. Begging into the crook of her own

shoulder for that which she couldn't have, Rhea lost herself over to impulse. The pressure was building, the slick sounds of her fingers pushing in and out of her own cunt echoing in the small bathroom, mingled with her ragged gasps.

In her head, Iyo was saying her name, whispering filthy words in Japanese in a voice like smoke and honey, her fingers replacing Rhea's own, fucking her slow and sweet, teasing her until Rhea's legs trembled on the verge of collapsing, and -

A knock at the door, polite, Iyo's voice calling from behind it. "I left my hair tie, can I come in?"

Rhea tore her fingers out of herself as though she'd been burned, pending climax eviscerated in the wake of the embarrassment that hit her.

She fumbled around with the faucet, cranking the heat higher to further obscure her form in a cloud of steam, cleared her throat, and called out, "Yeah, course," in a way she hoped to every God possible didn't sound too obviously fucked-out.

Iyo slipped through the door, shutting it quickly behind her, eyes darting away as though she hadn't already seen Rhea naked before, recognizing that for however brash Rhea was when it came to business, she was much more reserved on a personal level. As it was, Rhea could make out little more than the older woman's silhouette, and the colour of her form through the foggy glass.

"Don't use all the hot water," Iyo teased as she rifled through her things on the counter, the clacking of her jewellery against the porcelain of the sink as she moved the only indication of what the other woman was actually doing. "The hotel might kick us out."

"I'll try," Rhea promised lowly, restraining herself from letting her mind drift back to where it had just been. Hormones ran rampant with the desire to merge fantasy and reality, despite how fucking insane that idea was. She knew the second Iyo left, whatever shoddy resolve she had built up in the span of the last few seconds would entirely crumble, and she wouldn't be able to look the Japanese woman in the eye if it did.

With a weak sigh, Rhea reached out and shut off the water abruptly. Forbidden fruit be damned, she was a grown woman. She could tough out her urges, and prevent any of it from getting out of hand.

"Can you grab me a towel?" she asked, cracking the door of the shower just enough to shove her hand out the gap.

Iyo made an amused noise at her demand, but acquiesced anyway, leaning over the sink to reach for where Rhea had left her towel. As she turned to hand it off to Rhea, Iyo kept her eyes downcast to ensure she wouldn't see anything the Australian would rather she not.

The gesture made Rhea's heart pang painfully in her chest, from the consideration and trust between them which she had already partially trampled over. In turn, Rhea made sure Iyo couldn't see her when she grabbed hold of the fluffy white cotton towel. Once it was securely wrapped around herself, she slid the glass open and emerged.

"Why are you shy?" Iyo asked teasingly as she threw her hair back up in the loose, folded-over ponytail that had become familiar to see the woman work out in. "I won't stare."

The comment felt so casual, but in light of Rhea's own thoughts, it struck the woman in an entirely different manner. She fought to keep her tone light, the question spilling from her mouth before she could reign the boldness of arousal in. "Would you want to?"

It was risky, the words out of her lips before she could think about them. Iyo didn't react at all like the Eradicator expected her to - in shock and disbelief - just a soft, airy exhale, partnered with a grin that made the smaller woman's eyes alight with a sparkle. "Would you want me to?"

Teasing and playful. As pent up as Rhea was, still soaking wet in more than one sense, she couldn't bring herself to keep returning fire with the flirting, both because that was a fight she'd lose every time, and because there were only so many opportunities she got to be genuine and vulnerable.

"I have body image issues," the Australian muttered honestly, more than a little embarrassed to admit it. "I'd like to not worry, but I do."

Iyo's features softened immediately, her eyebrows knitting down in sincere worry. "About what?" Her hand lifted from where it had been braced on the porcelain counter, coming up to brush Rhea's damp hair back from her face. It was both comforting and disarming.

It felt strange to put it into words. No one had ever asked her that question. Most people just accepted her self-deprecation as an inherent part of who she was and moved on. "I've never really felt ...

womanly, I guess. I tried to lean into it, cut my hair, bulk up, get covered in tats. But the shit Liv says is true, people want girls that look like her, not like me."

Iyo's hand slipped down to rest against the side of Rhea's face, cupping her cheek with a tenderness that didn't belong in the same room as Rhea, not after what she had done. "Liv has no idea what she's talking about."

"Dom sure did," Rhea said bitterly.

“Dom thinks chicken nuggets are good food.” Iyo retorted dryly, “Don't trust his taste.” She paused, a thought visibly rolling around in her head before speaking again without a hint of joking in her voice, “There’s no one like you, Rhea. Do not try to change that.”

Her thumb rubbed along the jut of Rhea's cheekbone. Fuck, she wanted her, needed her. Not just a one-off, but something much more, something she had no right to ask for.

She couldn't help herself from turning and pressing a kiss to Iyo's palm, the skin there a little rough from the callouses that Rhea had grown to love the feel of. The smaller woman didn't seem to mind it at all. If anything, her fingers relaxed, as though she had been waiting to feel the press of her lips against her hand.

The urge to turn the moment into something more was overwhelming, so Rhea did the only thing she could to regain control of the moment, of her humiliatingly bare psyche. “You should save that line for next time you’re trying to seduce someone. You’d do well.” She teased, leaning away from Iyo's touch with a laugh, the sound of it forced and hollow.

It was like slamming a door shut. Iyo's hand dropped, the warmth in her eyes cooling into a placid neutrality. "Right," the Japanese woman laughed. "I don't flirt with anyone unless I mean it, but thank you." She grabbed what she needed from the counter, glancing at Rhea. "I'll let you get dressed. Remember to hurry, I want to see the replay."

The second the bathroom door clicked shut behind her, Rhea's knees gave out. She sank onto the cold tile of the floor, the towel bunched around her, forehead coming down to rest on her knees, the words echoing in her skull, warping and deluding themselves into something they weren't. *I don't flirt with anyone unless I mean it.*

That was the kind of thing that could keep someone up at night.

What the fuck was wrong with her?

Chapter End Notes

that last scene is the second thing i wrote for this fic, after the very first chapter. i am glad to finally set it out to pasture where it can no longer sap all of my brain cells. i can finally remove that damn 'eventual smut' tag from the fic. hip hip!

side note, first person to correctly identify the three queer millennial media references i slipped in this chapter correctly gets one free rhiyo fic request (or maybe another ship, try your luck!)

Chapter 9: together

Chapter Notes

> First of all - they fucking did it! Holy shit. Could say a million things but all it really comes down to is that. Holy shit.
>
> Second - I am sorry to report the scavenger hunt went unsolved because none of you watch Rupaul's Drag Race enough. Remember, if you're not revelling in Rhiyo on Bsky, you're only getting half the story.
>
> The final answers: It's not my fault you're in love with me - Mean Girls
>
> Lesbigay - Jennifer's Body
>
> I don't know if we handled that the best way - RPDR S6 Untucked (Everybody vs Laganja fight).
>
> As for the chapter ahead, as a reminder we are in E territory now. Enjoy the plot, and the …plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Considering Iyo had moved to the states with only two bags to her name - one for her gear, one for everything else she might need - she was surprised by how much stuff she had managed to collect over the years. Her car teemed with bags and boxes of all sorts, even after making strategic choices to leave some things behind. Rhea's rice cooker was simple, but worked well enough not to bother taking hers - the fancy blender Iyo had impulse bought two years ago had gone unused for most of that time - and despite Dakota's repeated, mystifying insistence that she take a toaster oven with her, Iyo certainly didn't need any other small kitchen appliances.

All in all, it was an ordeal. They were lucky that furniture wasn't a factor, but even so, Iyo was left wondering by the end if it would've been easier to have rented a U-Haul and put an end to the game of vehicular Jenga.

"I'm happy for you, chicky," Dakota said once the last bits of Iyo's things were packed away, the Kiwi's arms crossed across her chest lightly. Her waterline had slowly been overcome with redness, and she was blinking a bit too frequently for the emotion to go undetected, but

Iyo wasn't about to call her on it and make it worse. It wasn't that big of a deal - she was moving half an hour away, not to another country. In the end, though, she knew it was the dissolution of their stable that stung the most. "The place will feel empty without you."

"I will miss hearing you sing in the shower," Iyo admitted, rocking on the balls of her feet, unable to shake the restlessness that always came before change. By then, she should've been a professional at dealing with it. Instead, the sensation sat heavy on her shoulders, afraid to make the wrong call. Like all her other fears, it came down to taking a leap of faith.

Dakota's grin was watery. "You've got your own shower singer now."

The Japanese woman rolled her eyes, playfully swatting Dakota on the arm. "Stop it. We're not together."

She'd been on the topic like a dog with a bone ever since Iyo's surprise return to the States, but it had only worsened after Iyo had broken the news that she planned to stay with Rhea permanently. It was a waste of energy, as far as Iyo was concerned. She and Rhea had been in close quarters for weeks now, and nothing had happened, aside from Liv's unwelcome threats causing stress neither of them needed. All that had come of that was more honesty, more bonding, and more opportunities for Rhea to politely shoot Iyo down. There was exactly zero chance Iyo was going to toy with a boundary Rhea was clearly uncomfortable with crossing. While having a concrete denial might do wonders for her chances at moving on, and prevent another Kairi situation from occurring, Iyo had already learned her lesson. Don't chase someone who won't chase back.

The problem was, Dakota didn't seem anywhere near convinced, despite Iyo confessing every little development and roadblock that had come with living with the Australian. "Right, right, my mistake." The sarcasm was thick, her eyes rolling. "You're just best buds, like we are, except for the sexual tension."

Iyo sighed. "Kota, I mean it. There's nothing there. She doesn't see me that way." She hated the taste the words left in her mouth, bitter and disappointing. But it was the truth. How else was she supposed to interpret her flirtations being deflected as they had, at the hot and cold signals that switched every time Iyo loomed too close? "I'm done being stupid about my love life. This is better for me."

Dakota's expression softened, her hand coming up to rest on the small

of Iyo's back. "I still think you're misinterpreting. Rhea's last couple relationships have been a fucking mess, do you really think she knows up from down at this point?" The Kiwi paused, then added, "Not to say there isn't value in you guys dealing with your trauma like, separately, but this whole shindig feels inevitable."

That was the problem. If Iyo tossed everything Rhea said out the window, and focused on only what she did, then yeah, maybe there was something there. But that was the exact same thing that had led to the Kairi disaster. Iyo didn't want a repeat. She wanted something real, mutual, and reciprocated. If Rhea truly wanted her back, then she could say so, instead of Iyo being the one to put her emotions on the line again.

"That means it doesn't matter what I do." Iyo pointed out, a little sharper than she meant to. “I'm ok. I’m focused on our work, and our friendship." She took a deep breath, trying to calm the sudden swell of irritation in her chest. Dakota's words felt eerily similar to the ones she had spoken to herself, over and over again, while trying to convince herself that there was some divine, soul-bound future between her and Kairi. Not everything was meant to be.

To the Kiwi's credit, she ceded the point, studying Iyo's face carefully. "Look at us bickering. Bayley would call us idiots if she were here," Dakota commented, the jab at the former leader of Damage Ctrl light-hearted and true. Bayley's penchant for bluntness was never welcome, but often needed. "I'll drop it, chicky. But I'm rooting for you two anyway. It's stupid cute."

While the rest of their problems hadn't exactly disappeared, for the meantime it seemed like the most difficult thing Iyo had to deal with was an over-supportive friend. She could handle that. Iyo leaned into Dakota's half-embrace, snaking her arms around the woman's waist in return.

"Thank you," Iyo said, meaning the words more deeply than the Kiwi could ever know. It was nice to feel like she still had a family. That she belonged. Maybe they weren't a stable anymore, but Iyo would be damned if the world tried to erase their history. They were sisters in arms, and that was one thing that would never change.

If packing up had taken ages, unpacking took even longer. Rhea helped tote the boxes into the garage-gym in no time flat, but from there figuring out where everything would go got complicated. Some of it was simple enough, but then other boxes added unforeseen complications.

Rhea stared into one with a look of slight concern. "I thought you already had all your hair stuff here?"

"Only my travel kit." Iyo corrected, glancing down at the assortment of hair masks, bottles of dye, clips, brushes, and so on within the box. "I need a lot of maintenance." Her fingers brushed the orange-red tips of her hair - the dye had faded over the past month, but not perceptibly enough for Rhea to have noticed, evidently. If their schedules hadn't been so devoted to learning how to work with each other, she would've already booked a full salon visit. Instead, she was thinking of a quick at-home touch up.

The Australian's lips quirked down. It seemed like she was trying to conceal her reaction, but was doing a poor job. Iyo nudged her shoulder, prompting her to voice her thoughts. "I'm not sure there's enough room for all of this in the guest bath, Iyo." She said, sheepish. "It's your home too and all, but, you're already pretty packed in there."

She wasn't wrong. The bathroom she had shared with Kairi at the apartment had been hopelessly cluttered with twice the products, but even with Kairi gone, it had taken ages to contend with cleaning up. Iyo delved into workarounds to keep from imposing too terribly.

The downstairs bathroom was bigger than the guest, built with room for the laundry machine and dryer, plus additional storage in the form of a linen closet. But it was a bit inconvenient, intended for impermanent visitors. Big deal, Iyo would store the bulk of her things downstairs and pop down to retrieve things when the need arose. There was no need for Rhea to look guilty about minor inconveniences.

"I can keep it down here. Easy." Iyo assured the Australian, moving to grab the box from her, only for Rhea to hold onto it firmly. Iyo's eyebrows knotted down stubbornly. "What?"

"You could just... use mine? It’s a lot bigger," The taller woman suggested, her eyes fixed firmly on the ground. Iyo’s brain stalled out. The master bath was Rhea's private space, and while they had shared the rest of the house, Rhea's room was, for the most part, Iyo-free. Her

face must have conveyed something she'd have rather kept in, because Rhea did another of her swivels into aloofness. "C'mon. It's not weird. We already get ready together on the road."

Except the last time they had shared space like that, it *had* been weird. Rhea had been flirty, then sad, then cagey. She gently rejected Iyo's genuine feelings as a line, and then spent the rest of the night a full arm's length distance from Iyo. Rhea hadn't even joined Iyo in bed until she thought Iyo had fallen asleep - which she hadn't, too nervous about Rhea's behaviour to fully relax. Only then had Rhea touched Iyo, wrapping an arm around her waist the same way she had every time before, ignorant to how that little action was finally enough for Iyo to unwind and fall asleep for real.

Maybe consistency was the key. The situation on the road was novel, after all. All other parts of cohabitation were easy, because they didn't change between work and home. If Rhea's hang-ups were all centred around insecurity, was smudging that boundary her way of asking Iyo to help her work past them?

Iyo didn't want to make assumptions, but neither did she want to prod.

"Okay," the Japanese woman ceded, taking the box from Rhea. "I'll keep small things where they are. I don't want to intrude."

Rhea nodded a little stiffly, like she was already regretting her own suggestion.

Baby steps.

In the end, moving everything seemed like a dull non-event. Iyo had her things in Rhea's bath, and that was that. The next morning, after breakfast, she tilted her chin up towards the stairs, told Rhea she'd be taking a quick shower while the Australian settled the dishes, and made her way to the master bedroom.

The bathroom was definitely nicer. Much like the rest of the house, Rhea had splurged when it came to her specific needs, and that extended to the shower. Iyo spent five minutes just trying to figure out how the thing worked, and once she finally managed to turn the water

on, a jet of water immediately sprayed her square in the back. She shrieked, flinching away from the assault, fumbling with the space-age level shower control, only to end up with the entire ceiling dribbling misty, rain-like streams of water down upon her. Two full minutes of fumbling, and Iyo was cursing Rhea's fancy-ass shower in both English and Japanese, and she finally managed to turn on the normal showerhead.

And Rhea thought she was high-maintenance. Just because her hair needed ten products to prevent every shower from looking like a murder scene, didn't mean she was at all comparable to a woman whose shower valve resembled a videogame controller. Next time, she would settle for the soaker tub instead. Surely it would be more sane.

By the time Iyo had shampooed, conditioned, rinsed, and repeated, the bathroom was a steamy mess. Water puddled on the tiled floor, dribbling towards a drain in the middle of the room - thankfully Rhea had adopted some Japanese sensibilities. Iyo dried off, slinging the towel around herself, and glanced down at the clothes she had brought in with her. They were damp from all the water that had sprayed everywhere. The Japanese woman groaned her frustrations into the room.

Fine. Rhea was probably still downstairs. Iyo would just make her way to her room, same as always, and get a fresh set there. She'd deal with the wet clothes later. Iyo tightened up her towel and stepped out into the master bedroom, finding it empty. Relief rushed through her. She didn't care if Rhea saw her undressed, but she cared about the uncomfortable reaction Rhea might give her. Iyo was already feeling like an imposition, and didn't want to make it worse.

Iyo reached for the doorknob, and just as her fingers brushed the metal, the door opened, nearly clocking her right in the face if not for the hasty step backwards she took to dodge it. Rhea stood in the doorway, frozen, eyes wide. Iyo froze too, clutching at the towel barely covering her like a lifeline.

The Australian's eyes dipped down her form, lingering on her exposed legs, a stormy look Iyo had noted before flickering across her face for a moment, before Rhea jerked her head away, the blush on her cheeks visible all the way to the tips of her ears. "Shit, sorry." Rhea murmured, her voice hoarse.

That was exactly what Iyo had been trying to avoid. The rubberband snap of Rhea from an expression Iyo was a hair's breadth from

unravelling, straight into embarrassed and uncomfortable, all because of her. It felt like being slapped.

Even worse, Rhea's voice held a degree of accusation to it when her eyes flicked back for a moment, musing, "You can take clothes in with you, you know."

"I did," Iyo hissed harshly in return, the blush that had stained her skin from the hot shower turning from one of warmth to one of mortification. "They got wet." She was not going to stand there and try to explain to Rhea the nuances of the situation. The Australian could go and evaluate it herself, if she so pleased, instead of acting like Iyo had planned this. "I'm going to get new ones, if you move."

A flash of guilt crossed Rhea's face at the venom behind Iyo's words, her jaw ticking as though she was biting her tongue to prevent herself from saying something in return. Instead, she simply stepped aside, allowing Iyo room to pass her by. The Japanese woman did so quickly, the towel bunched up in her fists, her head down. Her skin was burning, the sensation of eyes on her back making her walk as briskly as possible away. Never, not once in her entire career, had being looked at by another person filled her with such insecurity.

Once Iyo had changed, she sat quietly on the bed, combing her fingers through the tangles in her damp hair. It was easier to focus on the physical discomfort of the knots, rather than the emotional hot and cold she couldn't escape. Why were all the women she loved so complicated? Why couldn't she fall in love with someone simple, and kind, and easy to understand? Someone who wanted her back.

During her reverie, familiar footfalls down the hall went unnoticed, a quick rap on the door announcing Rhea's presence. Her voice was soft, carrying through the wood, "Hey, Iyo?"

Iyo bit her lip, the sting of the earlier interaction still fresh. Already, she had gone through the entire conversation in her head of how she'd have to go to Rhea, and offer to pack all her things back into the guest bath as though it hadn't been Rhea's idea in the first place. To apologize for being exactly where she said she'd be. It was a routine she was familiar with. Be consistent, and deal with inconsistency.

"You can come in. It's *your* house." Iyo called out bitterly, unable to keep her irritation to herself, her tone clipped. She didn't even bother to look up when the door cracked open, Rhea's imposing frame filling the doorway.

"It's not, not anymore." The Australian corrected her, voice still quiet. The words were hollow to Iyo, who couldn't see the point in arguing about semantics. "I didn't want to come in if you were changing." Rhea added, and the consideration did bring a brief pang of guilt to the forefront, but it was quickly snuffed out by the memory of Rhea's accusatory stare, and her harsh tone.

"Are you uncomfortable because of me?" Iyo meant for the words to come out firmer than they did, her voice cracking halfway through her question, leaving the accusation vulnerable. Their brief conversation about Rhea's insecurities flickered back into Iyo's mind. It had sounded like the core of her issues had been being seen herself, but perhaps comparison played a bigger part. Maybe the reason Rhea was so reluctant to touch, and look, and feel was because of her own misplaced fears. So she hoped.

"No. I wasn't expecting you to still be in there. I meant for that comment to be a joke. It didn't come out right." What could have been deflection instead laid bare as an explanation alone. That was all the confirmation Iyo needed to know that this was another one of those moments where all she needed was to not react to Rhea's impulses. The goth's emotions were quick to form and slow to settle, with a habit of saying things she only half-meant. It was frustrating, but Iyo knew that Rhea was trying.

The tension in Iyo's chest released, allowing her to take in a deep breath that she had been holding. "I don't want you to feel like you can't talk to me, Rhea." Iyo's eyes lifted from where they had been glued to the floor, taking in the Australian's posture, braced against the doorframe as though she could dart at any second. She was afraid, too.

"I do, really." Rhea said, her eyes closing, a hand coming up to rub the back of her neck. She craned her face away, as though it hurt to look at Iyo. "About everything that matters."

The problem was, what that meant to Rhea was uncertain. To Iyo, everything about the younger woman mattered. The smallest details of how loud was too loud on the tv, the way Rhea adjusted the seat when she drove, how Rhea looked past Iyo instead of at her when she was holding back.

She couldn't push. Not then, not ever, without running the risk of history repeating itself.

Only when Rhea decided that whatever she was holding back mattered, would they talk. Until then, the friendly thing to do was to say, "Then I'm sorry for surprising you," and flash a smile that said it didn't hurt anymore.

All Iyo wanted was true, complete honesty. Yet she was the one lying in the end.

The distance worsened over the next few days, but only when Iyo took the time to notice it. Rhea had gotten better about hiding. Instead of outright avoiding Iyo, the goth was as handsy as ever in most circumstances, yet still undeniably distant in a way Iyo couldn't pin down. Drives to the grocery store together consisted of hands held over the centre console, sparring was carefree, one night ended with Iyo sandwiched against Rhea's side on the couch - so sleepy that the larger woman carried Iyo to bed for the second time. The whole time, Rhea's expression remained masked, and she was always careful to not look directly at Iyo.

Her time spent apart from Iyo increased in tandem. After practice, they had taken family outings - a jog with the dogs to the park and back. Brief, enjoyable affairs. Then suddenly, a schedule shift - the dogsitter came by midday, midweek, to take the younger two dogs to obedience classes. Rhea blew off joining Iyo on her run to crunch more hours at the bench. The eldest of the dogs, Barry, never listened to Iyo, and seemed content to lounge on the couch. So she went alone.

Rhea had an all-day physio appointment she politely informed Iyo of while she was in the middle of a call with Mio. Then, an ad promo to film at the PC that was strictly confidential. She finally noticed Iyo's roots coming in and booked her a touch up at their hair salon without asking.

Excuses that never lasted for longer than an hour or two. Some distance was healthy, and wouldn't bug Iyo, except that it seemed methodical. Strategic. There was a pattern to the way Rhea managed her absences. They were perfectly timed - always when Iyo would have to let her go. When she couldn't ask to tag along without making a scene. When she couldn't reject a thoughtful gesture.

Iyo was becoming paranoid, but she worried the trend would follow

them to work. So a day earlier than usual, Iyo took the liberty of preparing their trip details. Two nights in a queen suite in Atlanta. She cancelled their flights and packed a bag for the road instead. Since Rhea had taken to informing her of plans last minute, Iyo decided she'd treat her the same way.

Friday night, instead of joining Rhea and the dogs on the couch to half-watch Smackdown, Iyo settled into bed early. Normally she would have taken the time to call family members and keep abreast about life's various goings-ons, but Iyo's exhaustion was catching up with her. All the subtle shifts in her life were starting to take a toll. Her eyes closed the second her head touched the pillow, and she drifted off almost immediately.

The sound of her bedroom door opening some time later roused Iyo, her brain struggling to catch up. Rhea's silhouette loomed in the doorway, hesitating on the threshold. The hall light caught the side of her face, trepidatious. Iyo rolled over, and Rhea jumped as though surprised to see her there, exactly where she ought to be.

"Sorry," Rhea murmured, the apology sounding genuine. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Iyo was too tired for much pre-amble, but not tired enough to give up the opportunity to rib at the cagey woman. "You didn't knock. What if I was changing?" She teased, a hint of her irritation from their last misunderstanding escaping into her tone.

The taller woman drew back, the jab landing. "Right. I just - I went to double check what time our flight is and it's been... cancelled? Did they fuck up our tickets?" Her voice was sheepish. What she had to be nervous about, Iyo had no clue, her brain stuck on the sight of the woman's lip worried between her teeth.

"No," Iyo admitted, shifting onto her back again and drawing the blanket up and over herself dismissively. "We're driving out Sunday morning. Two nights. Goodnight, Rhea." The final words weren't meant to be curt, but fatigue lent them a note of irritation that she hadn't intended.

It seemed, at least, that Rhea was as clueless what to do with her as Iyo was with Rhea. The Australian's mouth opened, then closed, and she nodded once. "Goodnight," she echoed, turning to leave. As she moved, the light from the hall caught on her face just right to highlight the icy blue of her eyes, the colour of a sea frozen still. Then,

the door clicked shut behind her.

Iyo's eyes closed, sleep already tugging her back under.

Rhea stayed on edge the whole of the next day, spilling over into their drive the following. While Iyo drove, her partner meticulously selected every song. Between each, her gaze fixed out the window, barely a word between them aside from the occasional comment on the landscape. The mood was as strange as it had been during their last drive alone, but in a different way. Before, the awkwardness had been down to unfamiliarity. This time, Rhea seemed reticent.

"Do you listen to any women?" Iyo broached somewhere past the second hour of alt dudes singing. It was fine, she could get by without any variety, but a part of her was genuinely curious. Since the night they had come out to one another, neither of them had really talked about the other's interests through that re-established lens. Rhea's tastes in particular seemed a bit too narrow to not be a deliberate choice.

"Sometimes." Vague and unhelpful. Iyo's eyes flicked to the rearview, taking in the line of cars behind them. One of them kept tailgating even though they had all the opportunity in the world to pass. She sped up slightly, and was satisfied to see the vehicle drop back.

"Why sometimes?" Iyo probed, finding herself genuinely interested in the answer, and more importantly, the aversion to it. Maybe it was just an odd choice of phrasing, or maybe Iyo was projecting. "There's lots of women around."

The Australian scrolled through Iyo's phone, burying the need to respond behind the posturing of trying to find another song. Guilt started to seep into Iyo. She might have been pushing too fast, considering Rhea had been pushed into a corner by Liv's comments in the first place. "Got used to avoiding showing interest in women, I guess." Rhea admitted after a moment, her eyes fixed firmly on the screen, an air of reluctance in her voice. "Wrestling's hard enough without people reading into your tastes."

Iyo's heart wrenched. It was something she could relate to a little, in a distant way. "I see. For me... people only hear half of what I say, so it

doesn't matter." Behind them, the tailgater loomed again. In irritation, Iyo pulled into the passing lane and stepped on the gas. The Camry lurched forward, Rhea letting out a surprised laugh at the sudden acceleration. "What, do you like it slow?" Iyo teased, glancing over at the younger woman, whose eyes had gone wide as Iyo overtook a Prius.

"I'm good, didn't expect it from you, that's all." She was finally smiling, which was what Iyo had been going for. Soon after, Iyo was rewarded with a change in the music, Rhea's expression relaxing as a new song started up. It was softer, melancholy, a gentle marching drum taking a backseat to the voice of a woman Iyo recognized. "Taylor Momsen, huh?" Rhea remarked.

So she had pulled the song off of Iyo's own liked songs. The gesture made the older woman flush, but she tried to hide it by focusing on the road. "I didn't just mean goth men, Rhea." She commented, trying to sound casual, despite how important the clarification was to her.

The Australian's expression softened, the corners of her lips quirking up. "Noted."

They checked in plenty early. Most of the roster wouldn't arrive until the next morning. Very few ever willingly chose to be away from home for more than a single night for shows. For Iyo, that didn't matter much. Home came with her.

So it was a surprise when they stepped off the elevator onto their floor, making their way down the hall arm in arm, only for Iyo to hear a disconcertingly familiar, wholly unfriendly voice rounding a corner their way.

“It’s about time we discussed repayment.”

Raquel.

Iyo’s stomach lurched. It felt like a stone had settled in her gut, weighing her down and slowing her every reaction. Beside her, Rhea hadn't seemed to hear anything amiss. Instinct took over, Iyo grabbing hold of Rhea's wrist as she backpedalled. The taller woman stumbled, following her momentum into a tiny alcove between a vending

machine and drinking fountain.

“What-?” She started, only for Iyo to hush her quickly, slapping a hand over her mouth and pressing them further back out of sight. Rhea’s eyebrows knit together, but she listened, holding her tongue as the voices carried down the hall.

This time, Rhea heard them. Perhaps she was more attuned to Liv's chipper tone, the blonde's voice louder and higher pitched as she responded, “She's right, we did our part. You don't want to make us wait."

Footsteps on the carpet loomed ever closer. There was nowhere else to go, and little room to maneuver, flush as they were against the wall. If the others came much further, they’d have nowhere to go and be clear in sight. But something in Iyo's gut told her that hiding out and potentially getting caught in a compromising position was a better alternative than missing whatever this conversation was about.

A moment later, the footsteps stopped, and a third, equally familiar voice cut back. "You know I'm good for it." Naomi said, the woman's tone firm. "But I ain't really got mine yet. That was step one. You already have some gold. One belt for two. Nobody ever taught you to be patient?" Her voice was scathing, and it made Iyo's blood run cold.

Liv and Raquel, working with Naomi. Rhea's grip on Iyo's arm tightened painfully, her eyes widening, a flicker of betrayal in them that Iyo understood entirely. No words needed to be exchanged. It was clear what went on - Jade's mystery assailant was unveiled, but the why of it was still unravelling in the space of the hallway between them. They'd celebrated with and supported Naomi, all to find out that from the beginning she had brokered some sort of deal with The Judgment Day. A deal that, by the sounds of it, involved tearing the tag team titles off of Bianca and throwing them straight into a den of vipers.

The betrayal of a friend that hit too close to home. Iyo felt Rhea's hand slide down her arm, the grip on her wrist turning into a desperate grasp of her hand, like the woman was clinging to the last thing in her life that made sense. The smaller woman let her hand drop from Rhea’s mouth, curling the arm tightly around her partner to impart some comfort. The two of them stood there, listening intently. There had to be something else, something more, that they could use to understand. One belt for two... Liv would never give up a world title for a set of tag belts, so there had to be another exchange to take

place. Tiffany had to be next.

Unfortunately, that seemed to be all they were about to get. "Get to work before we start charging interest, then." Raquel barked. "We aren't asking again. One more month. That's all you got."

An electronic chirp sounded. The click, then firm shutting of a door signalled the end of the conversation.

"Heifer." Naomi cursed under her breath, and a few moments later, the sound of her footsteps faded back in the opposite direction.

Once she was sure the woman was gone, Iyo turned to look at Rhea, finding her unfocused. She still clung to Iyo's hand, the other arm leaned up against the wall above the smaller woman's head. Her clouded gaze bored into Iyo, chest heaving in slow, heavy breaths that seemed less stressed about their friends and titles getting messed with, and more...

Rhea's eyes flickered down, Iyo's gut swooping instinctively. The Australian's eyes were wide and dark. There was nothing but heat within them. For a second, all Iyo could do was stare right back, her lips parting as she took a quick inhale.

And then the spell was broken, Rhea peeling away with a frustrated scoff. She shoved at the vending machine in anger, the entire thing rocking. Iyo scurried out from behind it, taking a few steps away from the alcove and her friend. "Rhea, calm down," she said, her voice coming out thin. "It's okay. We'll figure it out."

"What's there to figure out?" Rhea laughed lowly, her face tipped towards the floor. "Road to Wrestlemania is here, and people will do anything for a belt. Can't trust fucking anyone anymore, Iyo. Friends are fake." Her voice was bitter, a growl of frustration. "Should've learned my lesson by now."

Anxiety gripped Iyo's chest. She had thought that they had started to make forward progress, but now it felt like old shadows were looming over them once again. "I'm real," Iyo asserted firmly, reaching out and grabbing Rhea by the hip, trying in vain to divert her attention. Only weeks ago, she had apologized for making Rhea's path back to a championship more difficult, and while Rhea had been certain about their route then, that seemed to have evaporated. "Do you regret not going back after the title?"

The Eradicator's grip on the upper lip of the vending machine

tightened, her eyes squeezing shut, a low noise of frustration escaping her. "No." She insisted. "So long as I get a title eventually, and get to screw Liv up along the way, I'm happy as can be."

The answer was fair enough, but not reassuring. Iyo wanted her to say *no*, because she had Iyo. Because they were friends, and partners. Because even if all of it went wrong and they failed, they'd fail together.

She was so tired of feeling like Rhea was just out of reach. The woman Iyo loved was impossible to hold, always and forever retreating from being known. Every friend and lover the Eradicator ever had turned their backs on her, but it was Rhea who never let them in. Rhea who kept her heart guarded and her feelings sealed away.

"I need some gym time to get this out. You go ahead to our room." Rhea said shortly, her eyes still fixed somewhere beyond Iyo, her expression shuttered.

The Japanese woman nodded once, resigned to the inevitability of this cycle. Rhea would get spooked and shut down, and Iyo would have to wait for her to cool off and be ready to act normal again. She folded in on herself, turning away so that Rhea wouldn't see her crestfallen expression. "Okay."

A hand caught her wrist on the way, hauling her back in for a brief, tight embrace. The hug was quick and fierce, the contact between them over as soon as it started. Rhea gave a single ruffle of the smaller woman's hair before letting her go. As quick as it was, the warmth of the gesture lingered on Iyo's skin. "I'll bring dinner back with me. SVU is on tonight, right?"

A goddamn impossibility of a woman, too fleeting to love, too endearing to let go.

Iyo grinned up at her, smitten beyond belief.

They were curled up on the couch, procedural reruns droning on and on. Rhea didn't pretend to pay attention. She didn't get why Iyo liked the predictable, repetitive nature of them with the same fervour that she liked slashers, but her presence was still welcome. The goth's nails

scratched lightly at Iyo's scalp, playing with her hair in the way that could soothe her straight to sleep.

Rhea's every exhale brushed against Iyo's cheek, the press of the larger woman's chest against her back warm and comforting. It was the closest they had been in days, and Iyo was already feeling the tension between them melt. An arm around Iyo's waist kept her steady, tucked between Rhea's knees. It felt right. They fit perfectly together. Even the scent of Rhea's shampoo had become a familiar balm. Slowly but surely, they were wearing away at each other's sharp edges until they became compatible.

And then Rhea's hand slid lower, her fingertips brushing against the exposed skin of Iyo’s hip where her top rode up. Iyo's eyes fluttered shut, her breath hitching in her throat. A fleeting touch that was there one second and gone the next. She was probably reading into things, seeing what she wanted to. Rhea didn't mean anything by it. It was a slip, and it wouldn't happen again.

Rhea's voice sounded low against the shell of her ear. "Chipmunk?"

The word was barely a breath, yet it made the smaller woman shiver, her skin prickling. It was the first time in a while Rhea had called her that, and this time it wasn't so endeared, but deeper, huskier. Iyo swallowed hard, and turned her head. Her throat bobbed as her eyes flicked upwards, finding the Australian staring at her with an intense, unreadable expression.

Iyo's lips parted, the desire to ask her what was wrong burning at her throat, but she couldn't make a single syllable pass her lips. Rhea's eyes dipped down, her gaze flickering over Iyo's mouth, then back up again, searching her face. Her breath caught, and Rhea's grip on Iyo's waist tightened in response.

The sound of the tv was drowned out by the rush of blood in Iyo's ears, the dull roar of her heartbeat. The hand in her hair shifted, sliding down to cup her cheek. Iyo was frozen in place. She was afraid that if she closed her eyes for even a second, this would end. Whatever *this* was. The moment felt fragile, even as Rhea leaned in closer, her thumb tracing over the curve of Iyo's bottom lip, pressing open the smaller woman's mouth. Rhea's attention was fixed firmly on Iyo's lips, her own barely an inch from Iyo's as her head dipped to ghost over her.

"Rhea," Iyo breathed, her voice barely audible. "Please."

"Shh, chipmunk." The Australian's other arm tightened around her, drawing her flush to Rhea's chest. Her nose bumped lightly against Iyo's as she tilted her head to the side, her breath fanning out over Iyo's face. "Do one thing for me, yeah?"

What Rhea asked for, she could have. *Anything,* Iyo thought desperately, *anything to make this real.*

"Then stop wishing for it and kiss me," the dream Rhea responded, as gentle as ever.

Iyo's eyes flew open, heart lurching. Just like in the dream, Rhea's arm was wrapped around her waist, fingers spread out across her abdomen beneath her shirt. But instead of sitting on the couch, the two of them were laying in bed, the covers kicked to the side. The space was too warm, the air thick. Rhea's breath against her ear was steady, a slow, rhythmic rise and fall that contrasted the thundering of Iyo's pulse. Iyo's gaze dropped to Rhea's hand, her fingers splayed across her. It was all Iyo could do to not move a muscle, terrified that she would wake the other woman.

Then Rhea's fingers flexed, sliding lower, the heel of her hand curled against the band of Iyo's underwear. The Japanese woman stifled a gasp, biting her tongue to keep from making a sound.

It was just a dream, she reminded herself. It was a dream, nothing that she could act on. Nothing that excused the way her stomach fluttered at the idea of Rhea moving her hand the slightest bit more. She needed to focus. Work. Friendship. Titles. Fights. Mending broken bridges. Not the wetness pooling between her thighs.

As if to prove that Iyo was wrong, Rhea shifted, face burying into the back of Iyo's neck, lips brushing her shoulder.

The only thing worse than being held like that by an unconscious Rhea was being held like that by a conscious one. That fear of Rhea coming to her senses, of the woman looking at her and realizing what she was doing and to who, was too great for Iyo to stay put a second longer. As gently as she could manage, Iyo extricated herself from the goth's grip, slipping from the bed and into the bathroom. She shut the door as quietly as possible behind herself, and flicked on the light.

The woman that looked back at her in the mirror was a stranger. She looked wild, flushed, pupils blown out wide and dark. Feverishly, she splashed cold water onto her face, tucking her hair behind her ear. It did nothing to calm her, the chill of her own fingertips against her

cheeks only reminding her of Rhea's. Of the dream that she couldn't have.

There was guilt painted all over her face. For a moment, Iyo just stared at her reflection, at the woman she barely recognized. She thought of all the times Rhea had been so gentle to her, and how badly she had wanted it to be more, coalescing into a bright light within her veins that screamed out to be seen.

She couldn't be there at all when Rhea awoke for fear the woman would be able to tell. So she changed, and snuck out, dooming herself to wander the halls until she felt less like her own traitorous body and meddling subconscious were a betrayal to her friend.

Iyo wondered what it was about tag teams that rendered her incapable of being normal. She was perched on some couch off to the side in the lobby, likely intended for people awaiting rides, not small women hiding from their stupid crushes. Could she call it a crush, anymore? This felt like something else entirely. Something bigger, and deadlier. Something that would snap her neck and stab her through the chest in tandem.

Aside from Dakota, there truly was no tag partner she seemed to be capable of having a stable friendship with. After all, Mio didn't exactly count - they were sisters and had no choice but to work out their differences. Even then, it sometimes took years for a particularly sore spot to be soothed.

Rationally, it wasn't wrong to feel the way she did. But it had to be wrong to dwell on it like she was, dream touches and real ones all mingling together in her mind until her skin was set aflame.

As luck would have it, she wasn't given more time to dwell, Naomi's voice carrying across to Iyo for the second time in as many days. "You know it ain't like that, B."

Bianca cut back at Naomi, not outright hostile but not sounding altogether pleased either. "We have a match tonight, and you’re trying to keep me in the dark. *We* are a team, *we* need to communicate. I can't have any more of this ego shit, I thought we were on the same page."

The sound of Bianca's footsteps drew closer, and Iyo's head snapped up, her gaze locking with the tag champ's. Bianca froze, Naomi nearly walking into her. Their faces were comical, Naomi's switching from a dark glower to a cheerful glow in a second flat. Bianca didn't shift so seamlessly, but there wasn't much point in pretending between the two of them. They were respected rivals first. Friendship didn't exactly factor into their interactions. Any goodwill between them was courtesy of Rhea, whose absence meant that the atmosphere was tense.

"Heyyyy, Iyo. You're here early." Naomi said, her voice strained and high. "Where's your other half at?"

Iyo blinked at her, nodding to Bianca instead. "Are you two ok?"

"Of course." Naomi responded too quickly on Bianca's behalf, her eyes narrowing. "Why wouldn't we be?"

Bianca huffed, her annoyance at Naomi still palpable. "We're chill. Just talking about strategy, we got a difference in opinion." The last word was punctuated with a sharp look at her tag partner, who was still looking haplessly at Iyo.

It didn't seem like Naomi knew that Iyo had also overheard her conversation with Liv and Raquel, which was reassuring, but something about Bianca's posturing gave Iyo pause. Last night it had seemed obvious they should give her the heads up about what was going on behind her back, but now Iyo was questioning that instinct. Maybe it was better to keep the secret for a while longer while they figured out a proper game plan. It wasn't exactly a friendly move, but it was a strategic one - in the end, one way or another, they'd be at odds over a championship.

Iyo forced her face to relax, her expression softening as she smiled, hoping that it came off as natural. She couldn't remember if she'd ever smiled at Bianca. "I see. Rhea is hard headed too. I think she is eating breakfast. Hard to keep track of her." The words came out stilted, the lie obvious.

"Right." Bianca responded, a flash of suspicion in her eyes. "Well, we'll see the both of you tonight, then."

Naomi nodded, her gaze flickering between the two of them. She, at least, seemed to buy it. "Yeeep! But we gotta jet, nice seeing you, Iyo. Tell Mami we say hi!" She tugged Bianca along, her partner relenting and letting herself be dragged, but not before glancing over her

shoulder at the Japanese woman as they left. Iyo was left with a sinking feeling in her stomach, so thoroughly disconcerted that the need to touch base with Rhea had overcome any remaining need to avoid her.

Stepping back into their room was like walking into the aftermath of war. Perhaps not that dramatic, but close - the sheets were thrown off the bed, pillows scattered everywhere. Rhea was sitting on the edge of the bare mattress, head in her hands. The moment Iyo was inside, doggy bag filled with croissants and hardboiled eggs in hand, the younger woman's head snapped up, expression wild.

"You were gone," she said, her voice hoarse.

"Uh-" Iyo began, before realizing she had no retort. She set down their breakfast on the nearby tea table, seeing packets of artificial sweetener scattered about, the tray holding all the little creamers tipped on its side. Nothing was broken, thankfully, but the more she surveyed the room, the more of a mess was unveiled. Couch cushions leaned on one another on the floor like an impromptu pillow fort, Rhea's travel bag upended beneath them. "What happened?"

The younger woman's face was pale, her expression drawn and tight. "It's stupid."

It didn't seem stupid, not if it had caused her to freak out this much. She looked like a wreck. Iyo crossed the distance between them and sat down at the foot of the bed beside her, her hand coming to rest on Rhea's knee. "Hey. Remember what I said?" She reminded her gently, not wanting to push. "It matters, right?"

The Australian nodded slowly, her head dropping. "You weren't here." she repeated, her eyes fixated on the space between them, at the hand Iyo had placed on her knee. "I don't know. I had a bad dream, I woke up, and - *I don't know*. I was alone." The last word was said so softly that Iyo barely heard it. Rhea looked ashamed that she had.

Guilt clawed at her throat, her grip on Rhea tightening. Iyo had run out of fear of her feelings, only to hurt the one she cared about the most. It didn't matter how Rhea felt about her, what mattered was that Iyo loved her and hadn't been there for her when the other

woman needed her. "I'm so-"

"Don't." Rhea cut her off, shaking her head. "You don't owe me that. Just... you're important to me. I should've said so yesterday. I can win back a title, I can get revenge, but I can't get another you." Her voice cracked as she spoke, her eyes lifting in fleeting, frantic glances. "I can't trust anyone. Except you. I need you."

Rhea's gaze dropped to Iyo's mouth, the Japanese woman's heart skipping a beat. The look she was being given was too familiar, the expression so close to her dream that Iyo could feel the hairs rising on the back of her neck. That brought guilt all its own. While Iyo was concerned with fleeing flights of fancy, she had left Rhea alone to wade through fear. As far as Iyo was concerned, that overcame any trepidation she felt about venturing too close to the other woman. Her arms fully wrapped around the Australian, carding her fingers through Rhea's hair.

"I won't leave you. Ever." Iyo insisted, touching her forehead to the younger woman's.

To her, it was a vow.

In only ten minutes, their work for the night was complete. There wasn't much to the backstage encounter with Stark. She interrupted a conversation they were having with Pearce on title contention, Rhea bristled, Zoey glowered, Iyo cut the difference between her past and present and got to the chase with a shout.

"Enjoy the next couple weeks of peace. It's the last you'll get. Once I'm calling the shots, things will be changing around here." The blonde threatened, levied straight at Iyo. Months ago under the posturing of their respective factions, they had pretended all it came down to was power and control. Who ruled the roost of RAW, and little more. With their respective allies scattered, the personal sentiment underneath it all was made plain. Zoey wanted to erase everything Iyo had as revenge for being disrespected years prior.

"We will see if you have any friends by then." Iyo countered. That was the one concrete advantage she had. Zoey's partnership with Shayna was relatively stable, but built on the foundation of Sonya's command,

it had always felt ready to collapse the second anyone else made a power play. That time had come, evidently. She felt comparatively relaxed in Rhea's midst. Their history was longer and more storied than most, without any of the fracturing that plagued so many others.

Once shooting content for that week's show was completed, the three parted ways - Pearce back to his office, Stark storming off in quiet irritation, Iyo following Rhea to watch the broadcast from the back.

There was one match of interest for them - the Judgment Day vs Bianca & Naomi.

While Iyo had filled Rhea in on what she had overheard in the lobby, they were far from settled on their thoughts on the situation. With imperfect information, and the tag titles to aim for themselves, Iyo thought it best to leave well enough alone. The conflicts within and outside of other teams wasn't her concern. Rhea held somewhat different thoughts, feeling more strongly about informing Bianca of the possibility Naomi was plotting against her. She had agreed to hold back for a short time to evaluate, but Iyo could see her thinking back on her own betrayal and all the people who hadn't warned her.

Losing a title due to no fault of her own was too close to the scenario unravelling before them. Between that and Rhea’s friendship with Bianca, Iyo was genuinely surprised she had deferred her judgment and heard out Iyo's doubts on the matter. All it had taken was her saying, *Something doesn't feel right,* and Rhea relented immediately.

As complicated as Rhea could be at times, there were parts of her that were easy for Iyo to decipher by now. While she was nervous about potentially losing Bianca’s friendship, her concern over maintaining what she had with Iyo was her main worry.

There were a limited number of monitors to crowd around that week, so without a private dressing room of their own, they ended up stuck watching the feed nearest to catering. Or rather, Iyo ended up stuck watching, piggybacked onto Rhea's shoulders to see over the small crowd of other wrestlers also tuned in, relaying the action down to her. As Bianca and Raquel locked up to kick off the match, Rhea's hands tightened around the smaller woman's thighs. Iyo wondered if the memory of her past matches against the women involved would always haunt her so obviously.

The opening was a little slow, with a series of power games between both sides until Naomi tagged in, sneaking a slap against Bianca's

shoulder that her partner clearly hadn't anticipated. There was a moment of uncomfortable tension that passed between the two, as the ref ordered Bianca out and Raquel stood back to watch the brief squabble in wry amusement.

Iyo narrated it all to Rhea as best she could, though the details of the story were being relayed best by the announcers at the desk. Ultimately, she hadn't been volunteered to watch the monitor for the play-by-play. Rhea had hoisted her up because the smaller woman had voiced her uncertainty about the tag champs' behaviour, and Rhea had trusted her wholeheartedly. The real action was happening in the subtle shifts in body language, expressions and quiet, hostile whispers being shot between partners that the mics didn't pick up on. While commentary certainly caught that there was some kind of miscommunication afoot, they didn't have the full picture. Iyo did.

As the match went on, Naomi took the brunt of the punishment. Bianca looked increasingly frustrated and uncertain, and her partner seemed more and more agitated by her partner's concern, brushing off any attempts to communicate or tag in. Eventually, Bianca had had enough, reaching to the far end of the corner's range to steal the tag off Naomi's back as Liv kicked her back into the ropes. This time, it wasn't Naomi or Bianca's face that told the story - it was Liv's, barely restrained frustration and complete disdain shot Naomi's way, as though blaming her for the trade out.

Caught up in the action as she was, Iyo missed the sight of another wrestler wandering closer in her periphery. Rhea didn't, barking out a quick, "What do you want?" that had the approaching purple-haired woman throwing her hands up in mock surrender.

"Jeez, what's got your panties in a twist?" Bayley retorted, looking more amused by Rhea's hostility than anything. "Can't a woman watch a show in this place? I'm not gonna axe murder you and your little minion." Iyo glanced down, watching the goth woman scowl at Bayley with barely restrained anger.

"Iyo's not my bloody minion. I'm not an idiot like you," Rhea mocked Bayley's signature tone of voice. The amount of heat radiating off of her was a surprise, considering the two had always been more or less on the same page. In all the time they spent circling the same stomping grounds, Damage Ctrl and the Judgment Day had never come into conflict due to Bayley having the sense to steer clear of the Eradicator. That had been then.

Now, Iyo was the only thing tethering Rhea's rage, lightly brushing her fingers along Rhea's scalp to soothe her. It partly worked, reigning Rhea in from outright hostility.

"Yeah, yeah. Minion, partner, weird... lookout, jockey, thing... same difference." Bayley shrugged, her expression unreadable. She bobbed her head around clustered bodies to survey the screen, musing, "It's too bad Jade's run got kneecapped, they're getting wrecked out there. But what goes around comes around, right?" Certainly a pointed jab that had nothing to do with the Big Three and their problems.

Iyo sighed, her focus on the match waning with every second Bayley lingered. Likewise, Rhea seemed more interested in Bayley than in the match, so there wasn't much point to keep up with the action. Iyo tapped the top of Rhea's head and gestured for her to let her down. As soon as her feet hit the floor, Iyo rounded on Bayley, who didn't look the slightest bit phased by their ire.

“You talk too much,” The Japanese woman muttered scornfully.

That bit of direct acknowledgment of Bayley seemed to bolster Rhea back into a fighting mood - her agitation flooding out with ease. "What is your problem?" she demanded, taking a step closer to Bayley.

"Nothing. I don't have any problems," Bayley clarified, voice going a bit shrill . "Just making an observation."

Iyo rolled her eyes. The whole encounter had the air of posturing. The Bayley she had once worked alongside wouldn't have approached if there was nothing she wanted from them. Yet if she had planned on being a real threat, she wouldn't be tackling it head on, either. Bayley was a tricky woman. Cowardly on her own, sure, but conniving and resourceful enough that presenting one's back to her was a dire mistake. While Iyo hadn't ever really liked her, she had been able to respect her at one point in time. It was that respect that drove her to stab Bayley in the back first.

Over a year of working together leant a certain kind of familiarity that hadn't gone up in smoke. The reason for Bayley's disturbance was there, floating like an undercurrent through her twitchy demeanour, the shift of her eyes around the room as though expecting another person’s presence. Iyo's brow furrowed. "Have you been talking to Dakota again?"

"What? No. Why?" The older woman asked, looking alarmed at the question, like her hand had been caught in the cookie jar. Bingo.

Rhea looked down at Iyo in surprise, while the shorter woman sighed in frustration. Bayley wasn't lying, but she definitely had wandered over because she was thinking about Dakota, at the least. "Normal people say thank you, Bayley." Iyo pointed out, her tone exasperated.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Bayley retorted, turning her nose up. "You're all traitors, and I am so glad Damage Ctrl is dead and gone. I've moved on. Greener pastures than wrangling a bunch of... of... *bakas*…" she trailed off in a huff.

Rhea snorted, her expression of surprise giving way to amusement. She draped an arm around Iyo's shoulders, relaxing as it became apparent that Bayley was anything but a threat to them at the moment. The former leader of Damage Ctrl wrinkled her nose up at them, her gaze darting to Rhea's arm around Iyo.

Sometimes, words said far less than what a dubious look could. The thing was, Bayley could read Iyo nearly as well as Iyo could read Bayley. While Bayley was definitely embarrassed at being called out, she was more embarrassed about seeing the Iyo she thought she knew - sullen, stoic, focused - relaxed as could be under the arm of a woman who frightened the daylights out of Bayley. Yet she bit her tongue, and revised her tactics.

"I saw how the Judgment Day thing went," Bayley began, for once thinking through what she wanted to say, "Ousting a leader and then... you know. Good for a bit, new members, then the rest of the founders eat curb - sorry," she held her hands up towards Rhea again, as though the simple act of relaying facts would be enough to set her off. If not for Iyo's fingers laced through Rhea's draped across her shoulder, it might have been. Bayley continued on, her expression tense, "I guess it kind of did end that way, anyway. But you had Dakota's back, and I didn't think you would."

Bayley wasn't apologizing for her past actions, not directly at least, but the sentiment of regret was present. Iyo doubted they would ever get there. They were both right in their own respective ways - she could acknowledge that much. Iyo had stabbed a friend in the back to secure her spot in a hierarchy, and Bayley had done everything in her power to maintain the position she had built up. Neither of them had wanted to see Damage Ctrl go the way it had.

Rhea's expression was still stormy, but Iyo was able to smooth that out with a gentle pat to the back of her hand, before disentangling herself from her. The Australian looked slightly disappointed to lose the

contact, but let it go, standing by as Iyo stepped forward to face Bayley.

The way Iyo saw things, there was nothing else left for them but to bury the hatchet, with no titles or factions left to fight over between them. She wouldn't apologize, but she could suggest a truce.

"Bayley-" she began, before being interrupted by the sound of the announcers exclaiming in surprise. The crowd outside erupted, the match apparently reaching a fever pitch.

Within a second, Rhea was hauling Iyo away and back up to report on what they were missing. She lifted her smoothly, arm wrapped around Iyo's waist, chest pressed to the small of Iyo's back. The smaller woman yelped in surprise.

"What's happening?" Bayley demanded, her voice sharp.

Iyo ignored the other woman for a moment, getting her bearings again. It looked like Raquel had just hit her Tejana Bomb on Bianca, Naomi breaking it up at the last possible moment to preserve their chance at victory. She had rounded on Raquel and was reading her the riot act, Bianca and the ref trying to haul the agitated woman back to her corner.

While Raquel was well within her rights to keep at Bianca, she eased back, cursing under her breath at Naomi. She looked anything but enthused to be in the ring suddenly, circling back to let an equally off-put looking Liv into the ring in her place. Bianca tagged her partner in right after, leaving Naomi and Liv in a staredown in the centre of the ring. Iyo's eyes narrowed, trying to read their expressions, but their masks were solidly in place.

"Liv and Naomi in." She reported down to the pair, watching as Liv unleashed the whole of her speed advantage on the larger woman. There were few who were able to meet Iyo in that regard - the smaller blonde woman had a natural upperhand. She knocked Naomi off balance a couple times before finally driving Naomi back into the ropes. The room went electric with tension. "She has Oblivion ready."

Liv grabbed hold of Naomi's shoulders, and down into the mat they went. Textbook. What came next seemed clear, until it wasn't. One, two - Naomi flipped them over, grabbing hold of the blonde's tights outside of the ref's line of sight.

"She reversed it," Iyo narrated, sure that Liv would kick in short order,

or Raquel would dive in.

Instead, the ref's hand came down for the final, uncontested three.

The bell rang, the crowd thundering. Naomi had pinned the world champion, and the cocky grin on her face didn't seem as surprised as the whole of the crowd was.

Iyo felt her stomach sink as Naomi raised a victorious hand in the air, Liv's smacking the mat, yelling out in frustration as Raquel looked on with barely restrained disgust. Bianca slipped through the ropes, seeming anything but pleased herself. Then, the tension broke, Liv kicking off the apron to storm up the ramp alongside Raquel, Bianca's glare chasing them all the while.

"Well, who fucking won!?" She demanded from the floor.

"Naomi." Rhea answered, already understanding from the lack of response where Iyo's thoughts had gone. Had it been Liv, she would've said something - anything - negative. Instead, she was left with conflict, feeling caught between celebrating a victory on behalf of two women that were supposed to be their friends and the confusion of what was simmering beneath the surface.

Bayley had no such qualms. "Holy shit! Why aren't you two losing it!? Naomi pinned Liv Morgan. Liv fucking Morgan?" Her tone of voice was incredulous, but she was clearly ecstatic beneath that.

The Japanese woman wriggled within Rhea's warm grasp, eager to be free of the confusing sight of Naomi's haughty air. Rhea gave a thin groan at the press of Iyo against her ribs before setting her down.

"Leave." Iyo shot Bayley's way, the fleeting urge to make peace incinerated by the confusion of the night.

"Fine. I'm gonna go congratulate my friend." The woman huffed, giving the pair one last odd look before skittering away towards gorilla as the crowd thinned. "Weirdos."

Once she was gone and the two of them were left relatively alone once more, Rhea raked a hand through her hair, breathing out hard through her nose. For a moment, Iyo thought Rhea might express her thoughts on the matter. Instead, the Australian glanced off towards where Bayley's voice carried down the halls, an annoyed look on her face.

"She's got a funny way of expressing herself," she snorted, taking hold of Iyo's hand and leading them off in the opposite direction that the others had scattered to.

The smaller woman nodded, looking back in spite of herself. The monitor flickered, a brief glimpse of Bianca and Naomi celebrating, looking at last like a team ought to. "Yeah," she said quietly. "She is... different." Iyo was torn. She and Bayley weren't a complimentary set, but for all the woman's faults, Iyo couldn't bring herself to think of her as anything other than an overbearing older sister.

They wandered out to the parking lot, their car parked in a distant corner. It had started to rain at some point in the night, and the pair of them were quickly drenched from the downpour in their sprint out to the vehicle. They huddled inside, both shivering from the sudden, wet chill. Rhea turned on the engine and cranked the heat, waiting for the fogged windows to clear. It was late, the moon peeking out from the clouds, but the arena was still buzzing with life.

Rhea shucked off her damp jacket, tossing it into the back seat with a huff. "That was fucking stupid," she muttered under her breath.

"Just a little rain," Iyo responded with a grin, wringing the worst of the wet out of her hair onto the floor.

"I mean the match." Rhea grumbled, staring out at the dark lot with an intense expression on her face, knuckles tightening down onto the steering wheel. "You were right. Something isn't adding up there. Even if I couldn't really see, it didn't sound like they were fighting like they should've. Like it was a setup." There was a long pause before Rhea turned to face the Japanese woman. "I feel guilty. If Damian had known Dom was setting me up and didn't say anything, I would've been even more wrecked."

The younger woman looked so earnest, Iyo felt a rush of sympathy. It wasn't easy for Rhea, having to choose between a battered sense of loyalty and proceeding with caution. "I won't stop you if you tell her," Iyo conceded. "But I am worried you'll be hurt." She reached across to rest a hand on Rhea's thigh, the woman flinching from the contact. Iyo drew back, worried she had overstepped.

"Sorry," Rhea said quietly. "I'm all over the place right now."

"I shouldn't have-" The words caught in Iyo's throat. She was worried that Rhea's reaction had something to do with that morning's outburst. She couldn't bring herself to finish, not wanting to put voice to those

fears.

"No, it's... it's fine." The Australian reassured her, chewing pensively at her bottom lip. She looked fragile under the dim streetlights, a woman with a head full of ghosts Iyo would've given anything to free.

Instead, she let the silence cloak them, the drive back an exercise in its own conflicted brutality.

When they got into their room, Iyo had expected more of the usual routine. Showers, cool downs, a bit of idle chatter before they got to sleep. The rain had been so torrential, they had gotten drenched all over again, and while the trip was short, it had made her weary.

Instead, Rhea had made a beeline for her gym gear, wasting no time in stripping off her damp t-shirt and jeans. She left her sports bra on, pulling on a pair of shorts - enough to be decent, and nothing more. "Quick gym run. I'll be back in an hour, maybe."

Though tired, Iyo's first instinct was to say that she should tag along. It was starting to feel like these occasional disruptions to the routine were becoming a routine of their own - Rhea's avoidance was no longer a new phenomenon, and the more Iyo thought about it, the more it felt like there was a larger pattern to it. "I can come. I need to keep up my arm strength." She reasoned, trying not to let the worry show in her voice.

Rhea was already shaking her head. "No, don't. I'm not in the mood for a second, chipmunk. You know how I get," Her tone was strained, expression tense as she hung up her things to dry. The younger woman didn't look at Iyo, instead keeping her back turned. Iyo could only watch in silence, chewing the inside of her cheek in frustration.

It didn't matter if it made Iyo feel pathetic, she needed to press the issue. The Japanese woman had been on edge for too long, and the worry was compounding into something that made her feel less than sane. A knot had tightened inside her chest, and it wouldn't unravel until Rhea finally told her what she was thinking. "Rhea," she said firmly. "I can handle you in a bad mood. It's nothing new."

The goth made a low, aggravated noise. She turned on Iyo, eyes

narrowed and her jaw clenched. "Well, maybe I can't handle you." Her words were clipped and harsh.

There was a pause, and Iyo could hear her pulse thrumming in her ears, a wave of dread sweeping over her. Frustration cloaked Rhea, the woman turning to stalk away from the dresser on the other side of the bed, careful to keep her distance. She ran a hand through her damp hair, shoulders hunched up.

"Rhea..." Iyo tailed behind her, her chest constricting as she watched Rhea struggle with whatever she was going through, her back to the older woman. It felt like there was something lodged in Iyo's throat, choking her words back as she stood by and watched the Australian struggle. Whatever this was about, it wasn't just some passing anger. It felt relentless, breaking Rhea apart before her eyes, replacing her with a stranger she'd only ever met in the ring.

"I don't need you to be with me all the time," Rhea snarled, touting her gym bag high up on her shoulder. As she turned away again, Iyo took note of the tendon along her jaw working tight like she wanted to say more, the stress pouring off the woman palpable.

The lashing out might have seemed out of nowhere, but Iyo had spent too long ruminating over Rhea's quick changes in mood to be fooled. That morning's worries had simply never gone away, only been painted over by distractions. She thought back to the way Rhea had insisted upon needing Iyo, and how at-odds it was with her insistence to be away from her in that moment. One was true, and one was a lie intended to protect the tortured woman from something she was too afraid to face.

Rhea made for the door, Iyo bounding past her in a rush to prevent her from running. Leaving for a matter of minutes had somehow led to this. Letting her go could only make it worse.

Iyo spun, landing her back against the room door with a finality. "I *want* to be with you!"

With a face carefully devoid of anything, Rhea grabbed hold of Iyo's shoulder and gave a pull. Stubbornly, Iyo shifted her weight back, grabbing hold of Rhea's wrist and shoulder in tandem to cut her strength. If the larger woman really wanted to, she would still be able to overpower Iyo, but it would be a fight. Instead, the second she made contact, Rhea's expression snapped from guarded to incensed. It looked like she was doing all she could to hold back from a physical

reaction - flexing her grip under Iyo's grasp, releasing the hold she had on the smaller woman, only to loom threateningly overhead. "Why are you being such a pest?"

Iyo would never tell anyone, but the truth was, Rhea did scare her. Always had - she wasn't the fearless person people seemed to believe. But those fears always ran secondary to something else Iyo wanted. A win, a title, or, in a moment like that one, a look into the mind of a woman she'd give anything to know completely. It didn't matter that Rhea looked ready to tear her limb from limb, gaze as dark as Iyo had ever seen.

"Because I love you," Iyo told her, reaching up to brush the hair from the eyes that terrified her so.

Rhea looked like Iyo had struck her, face ashen and pained. "You shouldn't. I don't deserve it, it's - please just move." That look. The wounded, pleading, carnal thing from her dreams - plastered again on Rhea's face, drawing in each breath shallowly as she tried to back away.

Iyo didn't let her, looping her arms around Rhea's neck to keep her in place, staring in wonder at the wide, dark eyes that finally made sense. She thought back on their months together, the time they had spent getting closer and the way it felt whenever that gaze was on her. The moments of contact between them when the world seemed to slow to a halt. It all fell into place, the answer that had eluded her for too long.

This time, Iyo anticipated the glance down to her lips, the grip on her shoulder. The broken plea dropping from her partner's lips, that sounded exactly like it did in her dreams, thick with unhidden desire. "*Iyo*. Tell me to stop."

She leaned up on tiptoe, breathing against Rhea's mouth, full of all the fear she'd never admit to. "You can have me."

Rhea pulled Iyo from the door with all the power she could muster. This time, the smaller woman went easily, Rhea following close behind. Their topple towards the bed was blind, the rough impact of Iyo's back against the mattress forgotten in the immediate press of Rhea's body against her. As she fumbled with Iyo's belt, the smaller woman set to distracting herself, and reassuring Rhea, through the press of open mouthed kisses up along the other woman's jaw. She hoped only that they'd be understood.

Once Iyo's damp jeans were hauled off of her, corseted top following it to the ground, Rhea finally met Iyo's eyes again. It felt like all the air in the room had vanished. Iyo felt dizzy. Her fingers tangled into Rhea's hair, drawing her back. She thought the goth might resist, but instead her grip on Iyo's waist tightened. Rhea dipped down, lips brushing the shell of Iyo's ear, sending shivers through her body. Her voice was quiet, tone full of regret and something more that made Iyo's stomach twist into knots. "I'm such a shitty friend."

"Shh," Iyo hushed her, pushing away the pointless guilt that Rhea seemed to be mired in through soft, languid strokes against the younger woman's scalp. "You are good to me," she murmured. The Australian buried her face in the crook of Iyo's neck, breathing unevenly. Iyo could feel the uncertain, stuttered tracing of Rhea's fingers along her thigh. "Go on, baby." The endearment fell from her lips so easily that she hardly even registered it until she heard Rhea's sharp inhale.

Rhea hooked her thumbs underneath the band of her underwear, dragging them down with little patience left to her, fingertips sliding up between Iyo's thighs in search of heat, finding her already slick, unspoken anticipation having done the work for Rhea. "You're wet," the Australian breathed in disbelief. As though that, of all things, could ever be a doubt.

Under different circumstances, Iyo might have bantered. As it was, she had spent too many nights ignoring that same insidious burn that delved through her then. Too many mornings chasing feelings that vanished in the golden streak of sunlight through a windowpane. "Please fuck me, Rhea."

For all their time spent together, Iyo had never heard Rhea's breath hitch. Instantly, she knew she'd stop at nothing to hear it again.

"Whenever you want, chipmunk." Rhea ran her fingers along Iyo's folds again, as though only to believe the feeling for herself. Iyo was grateful for that, she was having much the same problem convincing herself that the slow, wondrous pull of Rhea's fingertips against her clit was real.

Iyo's head lolled back against the bed, the younger woman chasing after her to check in. She crooked her hand against the back of Iyo's neck, capturing her attention. It was hard to listen to what Rhea was trying to tell her when in Iyo's periphery, she could see the younger woman was peeling off her shorts, the light catching the barest

shimmer of moisture along the Australian's underwear.

Rhea shook her lightly, clearly annoyed but admirably restrained despite it. "Iyo. C'mon. Focus."

"Sorry," she dragged her attention away from Rhea's thighs, shelving the curiosity about how she would taste for another time. It seemed Rhea was happy to stay put at her current state of undress, which while slightly disappointing, wasn't altogether surprising. Iyo squeezed her thighs together, willing enough focus to make it through a few more moments of not-touching.

At least Rhea seemed to understand the reasoning behind her inattention. "It's been a while since, well - I can get overexcited when I'm pent up, so I just need you to -"

"Less words, Rhea," Iyo chirped in her own irritation. She, at least, was tired of being dressed, kicking off her underwear while Rhea kept on trying to explain the inexplicable.

Two of them could be distracted, Iyo spreading her legs enough to catch attention. "For fucks'.." Rhea swore under her breath, getting to brass tacks as she climbed back on top of Iyo, pulling one leg up and around Rhea's hip, while pressing herself, damp heat and all, against Iyo. "I'm gonna be rough, okay?"

"Please."

True to her word, Rhea fucked Iyo hard, fingers digging bruises into her thighs, their hips meeting in sharp thrusts that sent waves of heat spiralling through the smaller woman. Her weight atop Iyo was familiar, all the time spent in the ring giving it a feeling of comfort despite the ragged, bruising nature of the way Rhea took her. Her teeth grazed Iyo's pulse point experimentally, testing the smaller woman's tolerance bit by bit. Iyo could feel the ripple of the Australian's muscles under her skin, tendons flexing as she rocked against the older woman frantically. Iyo arched her back, trying to meet Rhea and the rhythm she had set, the two of them falling in sync with ease.

Every thrust against Iyo brought a wave of physical pleasure, but nothing compared to the sound of Rhea's moans, each one as breathless and wanting as the next. "You like this, huh?" The younger woman murmured against Iyo's throat, lips soft and words sharp. "My fucking plaything. You belong under me." Iyo gasped, a flash of heat running through her body. Her fingers tightened around the sheets,

head tipping back as Rhea continued her assault, teeth grazing her throat, fingertips exploring the bare expanse of Iyo's chest.

Despite Iyo's best attempts to speak, to argue back that she was only beneath Rhea because she wanted to be, her voice felt thin in the face of the overwhelming pressure building inside her. All that came out was a breathy moan, the larger woman's echoing it a second after, a dark chuckle following.

"Did you do this on purpose?" Rhea whispered in her ear, pinching Iyo's nipple between her thumb and forefinger harder than was strictly pleasant, pushing Iyo back down to the mattress as she arched up. "I thought I was crazy. Fuck, Iyo, I'm going to fuck you everywhere," she vowed, voice rough with need.

It was like something had broken inside of the Australian, the floodgates having finally burst with the knowledge Iyo wasn't running. Despite the filthy tone she had taken on, her rambling was endearing to Iyo, the desire she felt spilling out of her with every slurred word, every drag of her slick, clothed cunt across Iyo's thigh.

Rhea kept on, punctuating her curses and moans with the thrust of herself against Iyo, hand trailing back down to roll her clit between harsh fingertips. Underneath the bravado, there still simmered the insecure woman Iyo knew, the Rhea that she loved caught between the two, "You - you want that right? This, I'll keep… anytime you want, I meant that. I - I want it," she mumbled out against Iyo's shoulder, much of it inscrutable through the hazy, mounting pleasure the older woman felt.

Despite the difficulty of parsing through another language given the circumstances, Iyo understood at least the need for reassurance in Rhea's tone, gone from haughty and degrading to almost helpless in the blink of an eye. All she could manage was a half-echo of the desperate younger woman, hoping it was enough to convey all she felt. "Yes. Anytime. Yes."

The words she wanted to say, *I always want to be with you,* gone in the crush of Rhea's mouth against hers, metal on soft muscle a soothing contrast to the pinch of her clit between nails, not nearly as loving as the moan Iyo exhaled into Rhea's mouth as she came was.

Rhea didn't slow her ministrations, working Iyo through her orgasm with a singular focus. As boneless as Iyo felt, she resisted the urge to pull away, obeying the soft tug of her hair and opening up her throat

to Rhea's wanting lips.

"Mm, good girl, stay with me." The larger woman shifted atop Iyo, gripping her hips to thrust down with more purpose. "I won't take long."

The overstimulation was nearly unbearable, but Iyo found herself wanting every moment of it. For so long, this had been what she chased - being wanted, so deeply that it hurt. Her pulse hammered, attuned to the smallest hitch in Rhea's breathing, the gentle bucking of her hips as she drove herself higher. Rhea's mouth was hot and wet against her throat, her teeth grazing skin in blissful recklessness, unafraid of leaving her mark where it might be seen.

The Australian was so slick it barely felt like any barriers existed between them, save for the drag of Rhea's underwear catching at the apex of each thrust. Iyo let her hands fall to the muscular crest of Rhea's back, curling her fingers under the straps of the woman's bra, exploring without removing the feelings of safety and comfort Rhea still clung to in her last shreds of clothing.

"Come for me," she whispered into her partner's ear.

The response was immediate, Rhea's body shaking as she tensed against her, back flexing beneath Iyo's fingertips, burying her stuttering breaths into the pillows beside her head, curses and pleas swallowed away in the wake of her orgasm. As the tension spilled out of the larger woman, going limp atop of her, Iyo kept her arms looped around Rhea, guiding her down to lay beside her. Her dark hair fell over her face, the Australian not bothering to shift it away, staring up emptily at the ceiling.

"Was that good for you?" Rhea asked uncertainly, voice hoarse.

After all that, she was still as anxious as ever. At least all other tension had melted out of the woman, the usual hard edge of her softened by the afterglow. Iyo didn't have words for how she felt - none that weren't the immediate declaration of her undying love, or a garbled mess of Japanese that Rhea wouldn't have a chance of understanding - but there were ways she could settle the goth's concerns without them. She cradled Rhea's jaw in her hands, kissing her sweetly, taking the time to appreciate the soft give of her mouth the way she hadn't in the heat of the moment. Iyo was careful not to catch the woman's lip piercing against her teeth, exploring her warmth gently with lips and tongue alone.

Rhea's eyes were every bit as dark as they had been at the start once she drew back. "You're really hot," she muttered, brushing a stray piece of Iyo's hair out of her face with care.

Iyo grinned, tongue poking out from between her teeth playfully. Nothing could hurt right then, high off the pleasure still rolling through her and the look of unsheltered admiration on the Australian's face. "You too." She traced a finger along Rhea's jaw, down the side of her throat to the dip in her clavicle. "Pretty."

A faint pink blush bloomed on the woman's cheeks, and Iyo delighted in the sight. It had always felt like Rhea was a woman made of sharp contours and harsh lines. To see her on the other side of things was new, uncomfortable but not off-put by the open flirtation. "Shut up." She ducked her head, looking away to hide her expression. "Don't pillow talk me."

It wasn't a tone of voice Iyo had heard from Rhea before, neither truly defensive nor outright pleased by the comment. Iyo wondered at it, whether the reaction came down to simple unfamiliarity or if there was another reason to try to fight off her affections. With every mystery solved came another to unravel, with this beautiful, cagey woman.

A moment later, Rhea straightened up, sitting with her legs folded beneath her on the bed. "I'm gonna take a shower, but uh. Question first?" Iyo made a soft noise of encouragement, watching as the younger woman chewed the inside of her cheek. "Does this change anything?" Rhea asked quietly, rambling on as though ashamed to ask, "I meant it, I'm a shitty friend. I don't want to be, but I am, and if doing this would hurt our friendship at all, then I'd rather just not. So, be honest."

Iyo's heart jolted once, painfully, with the realization that there was a disconnecting factor between sex and their relationship for Rhea, and that the way she'd describe what they were still amounted to only that - friends. But the puzzle pieces that kept Iyo from figuring out how to be Rhea's friend were locked down behind the lust in the Australian's gaze that she hadn't known how to interpret until then. How could Iyo tell her that all the things that could hurt their friendship were the things that formed its boundaries in the first place?

She couldn't.

"Would you have had sex with me, if we weren't friends?" Iyo

questioned instead, wanting first to know whether she was filling a role anyone else could. She sat up, drawing her legs underneath her in a mirror image of the goth, her brows knit together in worry.

"Uh... no?" Rhea seemed confused, unsure of why Iyo was asking at all, and clearly afraid of accidentally answering in a way that would hurt her. "I mean, I did, you know. Before you. Not anymore. I haven't for a long time." She rubbed the back of her neck like she was embarrassed at that, though surely it must've been clear Iyo was in the same boat.

Going back to the way things were wasn't an option, because it had landed them there in the first place - the hapless worry Iyo had over Rhea's cloistered emotions, the silent frustration carried by the both of them over things which didn't matter that prevented them from voicing those that did. If Iyo's only way to see Rhea's heart was through her gaze as she came, so be it - at least she had found it. At the very least, it was halfway to Rhea being in love with her.

"I'm happy you trust me, Rhea. It won't change how I feel about you." The truth was wound tight in every word, gone unnoticed in the way Iyo was so accustomed to.

Relief poured over the Australian's face nonetheless, the younger woman reaching across to tuck a strand of Iyo's hair behind her ear, letting her fingers linger there, her expression almost unbearably tender. Iyo leaned into her touch, her eyes fluttering shut.

"Okay," Rhea whispered, thumb tracing a circle on Iyo's cheekbone, the warmth in her gaze smouldering low. "I can be weird about it though. I don't mind cuddling up any other time, except after - I'm gonna sleep on the couch, if that's cool. It's not you, promise."

It was the strangest, saddest rejection Iyo had ever received, because she could see the lie in the younger woman's face, but was clueless as to which part was untruthful, exactly. Every other opportunity Rhea had to seek Iyo’s physical presence out, she jumped at, so to flinch away after the most intimate line was a bit odd. But it was Rhea, and it was her feelings, enigmatic as ever in all new ways. Iyo didn't have the right to force her out of her comfort zone, so instead she put on that lie of a smile again, nodding happily away at another line etched against her heart.

Her answers, like so many before, would come in time.

The next morning was interesting, to say the least. For a moment, it seemed like a repeat of the previous - Rhea sprawled uncomfortably on the couch instead of their mess of a bed, but just as seemingly alone. Regret started to pour through her, seemingly as inescapable as quicksand, and then -

And then, Iyo walked out of the bathroom as bare as sin. Instinct tore her gaze away instantly, as though this were another awkward locker room encounter, but that too vanished into nothing at Iyo's gentle chiding. "You can look."

As much as that felt like anathema to everything engrained in Rhea, she was only human. So she did, the warm look Iyo gave her second only to the way she strode over to the Australian, sat across her lap, and kissed her so sweetly that Rhea had to second guess if she were simply dreaming the whole thing up.

"Guh, morning," was all she could muster up with her brain screaming to kiss Iyo again, toss her back on the bed, slip her head between her partner's thighs and make her whimper the same way that she had the previous night. That sound would be seared in Rhea's mind forever. Of course, she wanted to see what other noises Iyo might have in store for her.

Like the light giggle, so much freer and happier than anything Rhea had heard from her before, that answered her greeting. "G'morning." Iyo offered in her best approximation of Rhea's accent. It wasn't close, but it was too endearing not to grin at like it was a dead ringer. "Do you want to go out for breakfast?"

Oh, *so* too many words. She understood Iyo's complaints perfectly in hindsight. Go out for breakfast? No. Never. Breakfast was right there, on her lap, and Rhea needed only to ask for it. Or, say nothing at all, giving into the urge to stare as she wished - earning a smack on the shoulder, and exactly what she desired soon after.

The drive back took twice as long as the drive there, with about triple the amount of stops for - well. Rhea couldn't focus on driving for very

long when she kept catching Iyo looking at her with the kind of heat that said she'd be only mildly annoyed by the Australian pulling off to a quiet rest stop to resolve that look yet again.

Iyo fared a bit better, but only because she was very liberal about slapping Rhea's hands away from her lap. Just like in the ring, her strikes *hurt*. Any bruising was worth it for the one time Iyo did let Rhea's fingers creep along her inseam, breath coming shallower until she took a turnoff towards some kind of state park to get Rhea's wandering hands under her clothing instead.

Between it all, they still managed to talk, at least a little. Rhea sensed Iyo wanted something more in-depth, but *talking* about sex quickly became *thinking* about sex, which incinerated Rhea's focus entirely. So ultimately, their ride back was resolved much as the way there was - fighting over a playlist that had over the course of the trip, stopped being Rhea's, or Iyo's, and had become theirs.

Iyo telling her "I think we should keep doing this," seemed a bit redundant anyway when they had blown past half a dozen trysts in twice as many hours, anyhow.

What could Rhea respond with that wasn't embarrassing on infinite levels? *I need you like breathing,* and *The second we get home I'm getting my strap,* had both nearly tumbled from her mouth in the quiet moments that came after each of Iyo's broken moans. It took everything in her to hold them back, replacing the need to emotionally immolate herself before a woman who wasn't truly hers with frantic, open mouthed kisses that felt just as dangerous.

Speaking those words didn't make them any truer. They would only make Iyo suspect that this arrangement they had suddenly fallen into didn't stop purely at the physical for Rhea. That was a step too far, a risk beyond being worth it. She had a devoted friend who she could trust with anything, a talented tag partner the likes of which the world had never seen, and an incredibly attractive woman who seemed eager to fall into bed with Rhea time and again. She wouldn't push her luck.

And Rhea didn't. Once back in Orlando, home became a series of places to unravel Iyo, as it was a series of places to see her smile, hear her laugh, hold her in Rhea's arms.

While her promise to fuck Iyo *everywhere* hadn't been fully coherent or serious, it had become a reality. Sometimes it wasn't even at her

behest. Rhea *had* wanted to watch Scream, it was Iyo who put a stop to movie night with a tender bite to Rhea's ear. Just like it had been Iyo who desecrated their training mat, more than capable of kicking out of Rhea's pin and choosing instead to moan about it. There'd been no three count, because at that moment, beating Iyo wasn't anywhere near as important as pleasing Iyo.

Despite all the distractions, or perhaps because of them, the practice they did get in went beautifully. Their combos came seamlessly, familiarity finally winning out over instinct when it came to reaching out for their partner. Rhea's practiced hot tags came where they should've for the first time. Even their finishers, which had once felt incongruous with one another, were beginning to blend into a smooth 1-2 punch that used the best of Rhea's strength and Iyo's speed. Dakota had offered to come over the following weekend to trial run in private with them, all to keep their cards close to their chest as opportunity loomed closer - the message that Pearce had scheduled their first true match for contention in a matter of weeks against the Judgment Day sending the two of them into another romp to celebrate.

"You know, if I wasn't worried about you getting burnt, I'd say you should cook in even less clothes," Rhea commented idly, gazing openly at her partner's ass now that she could without fear of being seen as a sexual deviant. Now they both knew she was, rather, and that Iyo didn't mind. She drifted her way behind the smaller woman, distracting her pancake flipping with a nip at her shoulder. The smell of cooking oil was an unwelcome distraction from the scent of sweat and skin she had become accustomed to over the last days.

Iyo elbowed her in the ribs, harrumphing as she turned back to the frying pan. "First you are mad at me because I don't wear enough clothes. Now you are mad I wear too many." She shook her head in mock disgust. "Make up your mind."

"Either way's fine," Rhea countered, wrapping her arms around the smaller woman, resting her chin on top of Iyo's head while Iyo continued to try to multitask. "I'm just trying to cut back on laundry. Our underwear reserves are running low again, we're gonna need to run another load."

"I did the last one." She could feel the vibration of Iyo's words as the woman spoke. "It's your turn. Stop distracting. We need to talk about the Rumble." Her voice turned stern. Iyo was nothing if not a dedicated planner.

"Do we have to pretend to give a shit about singles titles still?" Rhea complained, the whole thing now seeming like a massive effort for very little payoff. That was, unless Iyo still had her own designs. "You planning on ditching me for a hot date with Wrestlemania?" She wasn't completely serious with the complaint, but it still came out a touch sour, the idea of being left to her own devices for the biggest event of the year not particularly appealing. The possibility felt like a waste when they'd spent so long making things work.

Rhea didn't think of it as jealousy - she could do the same, after all. It was concern for their future. She'd just put all of her eggs in one basket, and she wasn't quite sure if Iyo had done the same, considering she had always teetered the line between the tag division and her own solo aspirations.

She didn't quite expect Iyo to spin on her heel, stepping back in surprise as Iyo jabbed a finger against her chest. "Bad joke. We are winning together. But practice is practice. What happened to wanting to hurt Liv?" She scolded Rhea, looking up at her as though expecting her to fight back.

But Rhea didn't, a fondness settling in her chest as she stared down at Iyo's determined face, bossy in all aspects of her life except for perhaps one. Well, some of the time, anyway. Rhea didn't mind a bratty bottom. "Okay. If we're the last two, we both jump off the apron at the same time. Otherwise, give 'em hell, and stay away from the damn ropes, will you?" She could only imagine the Genius of the Sky's penchant for acrobatics causing a premature exit from the Royal Rumble. So long as Rhea was around, she'd be more than eager to run interference for her partner to let her run as many risky manoeuvres as she'd like, but it still wasn't the smartest of plans.

A brilliant grin lit Iyo's face up as a thought took root, never one to be grounded for long. "I can moonsault off your knee." She looked so happy with her suggestion that Rhea had to fight to suppress the mirrored smile threatening to spread over her own face, not willing to give into any more of Iyo's ridiculous ideas - at least, not until she had a full stomach of her delicious cooking and a chance to think over whether a couple of feet was really enough elevation to moonsault off of.

Possible. Also, inefficient and pointless.

It would make Iyo happy, though.

They were sat at the airport terminal, burning time with a combination of animal videos, crossword, and sudoku when their honeymoon phase came to a brief and embarrassing pause.

"Five letter word, CR-V or Civic?" Rhea questioned aloud, arm wrapped around Iyo's shoulder as she happily watched a livestream she had found of some zoo's red panda enclosure. Mondays were supposed to be the easiest crossword of the week, but the Australian was still struggling to make sense of some sections.

"Honda." Iyo replied without hesitation, peering over at the puzzle in curiosity. Her eyes tracked down the list of clues for any more she might know, jabbing at one in sudden confidence. *Tolkien tree creature*. "Ent!"

The Japanese woman would never stop surprising Rhea, the confusion on her face mirrored only by fondness. "How do you know that?"

Iyo shrugged, eyes sparkling with a touch of pride. "Long flights. Long movies. I used to spell aunt wrong a lot," she admitted a bit sheepishly. "No E. Weird."

"I guess so. Ent," Rhea muttered as she penciled it in. The clue was a perfect fit, and it knocked off another couple of words she had been stuck between two options on. Unthinkingly, she pressed a thankful kiss to the top of Iyo's head, the smaller woman preening under the affection, hand falling onto Rhea's thigh reflexively.

An awkwardly cleared throat disrupted the moment, Rhea turning her head away from Iyo to catch sight of Dakota nearing. "Uh, hey, dudes. What's... up?" Dakota questioned in confusion. The Kiwi looked between them dubiously, as though not believing what she was seeing. They weren't acting that much differently from usual, but of course Dakota would be the one to see through even the slightest of changes.

The last thing Rhea needed was for the wrong assumption to be made, but she wasn't quite sure what to say. Iyo seemed similarly spellbound, a conspicuous silence stretching between the three of them.

For once, Dakota mustered the nerve to tackle the obvious. "Did something change, here?"

"Uh," Rhea and Iyo answered in tandem with nothing more than stuttered deflections ping ponging between them in an incomprehensible jumble of sound. Through it all, though, Rhea kept her hand where it was - and Iyo never pulled hers from its perch on Rhea's leg, either.

Dakota trying not to laugh at their expense was an entirely unwelcome development, her shoulders shaking as she fought against it. "Okay. What bathroom am I avoiding during the flight?" While she was clearly joking, Rhea *had* thought about it, and was rendered completely silent by the callout.

Iyo snorted, the dam of awkwardness breaking around her, even as Rhea's mortification increased with her partner's reply. "We are in the back." Her thumb drew little circles over the fabric of Rhea's pants. "It is not a long flight, we might be in there the whole time," she remarked with an aloofness that nearly gave Rhea whiplash, her jaw slackening at Iyo being that cavalier about her - *their* - sex life.

"I shouldn't have asked," Dakota groaned, burying her head in her hands as Iyo broke into a fit of laughter, pleased at her nosiness having been repaid tenfold.

"Don't joke about things like that," Rhea grumbled in embarrassment, slapping Iyo's shoulder lightly.

The smaller woman grinned, leaning up into Rhea's ear to murmur, "Who says it was a joke?" out of Dakota's earshot. The very sight of it, coupled with Rhea's immediate coughing fit, seemed enough to send a message, as their third wheel promptly declared her intentions to go grab a coffee before the flight, abandoning them both with a half-hearted, "Congrats, you two. I wish I was deaf and blind."

Once she had left, Rhea finally managed to find her voice, a little hoarse and definitely not doing justice to her indignation at how little her partner was doing to help her case. "She thinks we're dating."

Iyo shrugged, returning back to her video with the utmost of casualness. "She has thought that for two months." She glanced over at Rhea, a flicker of some emotion Rhea couldn't identify passing over her face before it settled back into its normal placid expression, "Would you rather explain the truth?"

The answer to that was clear as day, but why it brought about so many feelings of shame and guilt was beyond Rhea's understanding.

Some things stayed the same. The weekly RAW ritual hadn't wavered. All the same faces and attitudes roamed unchecked, the locker room still teetered on a knife's edge between polite camaraderie and cutthroat opportunism, catering was serving another frickin stew, and Iyo and Rhea were sneaking through back corridors for the best spot to watch the matches unfold. The previous week hadn't been ideal, and Rhea couldn't be held accountable for what she might do in public should Iyo sit perched on her shoulders like that again.

So up through the service tunnels they went until finding themselves somewhere back behind the entrance ramp, huddled between tables of A/V equipment, under a low stage outcropping. Or, Rhea was huddled, Iyo stood comfortably in her shadow, tucked into Rhea's arms, head leaned back against her shoulder as they waited for the night to kick off. Every match mattered, but the main draw of the night concerned IC contention. Lyra had yet to decide on whether Dakota was owed a rematch, so Pearce had gone ahead with scheduling a followup bout between Dakota and Ivy Nile to determine who had first shot. Until then, the whole thing was just business as usual.

And yet.

"I'm happy," Iyo mused during one of the breaks, tilting her head to look back at the Australian, "it's been a long time since I was," she admitted. As much as Rhea had privately suspected that to be the case, hearing the confession from the Japanese woman's lips still felt like a gut punch, a sharp ache spiking through her at the reminder that this kind of peace wasn't new only to her.

"I love you." Rhea didn't mean for it to sound so devout, it slipped out without her thinking. There was a split second she had to choose whether she would rush to justify the words or simply leave them bare. But they were true, and nothing about the statement needed to be complicated. A week ago, she wouldn't have considered whether those three words needed a followup to deflate their significance. So she let them lie, peaceful and undisturbed, and basked in the peaceful, quiet murmur that Iyo returned a few beats later.

"Love you, too, Rhea."

Rhea smiled into Iyo's hair, hugging the smaller woman tight as the music kicked back up again, a pop-laden sting greeting Dakota's entrance. The Kiwi bounced out onto stage with a bit more pep in her step, a spring to her step that spoke to her enthusiasm at having been granted the chance to reclaim her shot at glory.

They all deserved a spot of happiness after all they'd gone through. Dakota, Iyo, and even herself.

Letting go of Iyo was difficult, but Dakota deserved a good old fashioned fireman's carry to the back after fighting tooth and nail against Ivy and coming out the other side the victor, despite the absolute clinic the blonde had put on Dakota's knee. Ivy's offense was brutal, calculated, and precise, dedicated not only to trying to win the match, but to making sure any in Dakota's near future came with difficulty. After all that, Rhea wasn't letting the Kiwi limp out of there without some sort of fanfare.

Iyo, for her part, didn't look out of place at all. She stayed right beside them, cheering and hyping up the crowd with the kind of fervour few but her could muster. They loved her nearly as much as Rhea did - and when Iyo wanted someone to feel something, they did. It was the magic of a star that couldn't be taught.

Before the end of the night, the rematch was made official. Three weeks to heal up, and the IC title would be back on the line. It felt good, knowing that step by step, they were getting back onto the right path. Sure, Dakota's success had nothing to do with Rhea, or with Iyo, but it was a reminder of better things ahead.

The schedule already looked absurd. Queenslayer in the Rumble, back to compete for spots in the Elimination Chamber if they had a strong enough showing, contention match the following week, on and on until the Road to Wrestlemania had become Wrestlemania. They didn't have time for distractions - yet Rhea was already counting down the minutes until she and Iyo could be back in the privacy of their hotel room. Team bonding had to count for something.

It was on their way out, Dakota peeling off early so as to avoid having

to see any more of her friends' shameless flirtations, that the pair were waylaid by another face that while once friendly, had quickly adopted the same level of dubiousness that everyone in their orbit had been wearing of late.

"I need to talk to you two." Lyra demanded sternly. She wasn't in her full ring attire, but her version of dressed down was much the same as Iyo's - flashy for the same of it, but not enough to prevent her from getting into the thick of things at a moment's notice if she needed to. The stress pouring off of her seconded the impression that she wasn't there for idle chit-chat.

Encounters like that one were still trouble to Rhea, who would've much rather given Lyra the cold shoulder than risk codifying an enemy. Perhaps that was why she lacked actual friends - everyone she could stand, she ignored for pure survival.

Iyo was much better at navigating the vast voids between allies and foes, her smile perfectly charming, if a touch guarded. "Yes?" She tilted her head questioningly at the woman. Rhea followed her lead, watching the pair warily with a smile that she hoped didn't look as pained as it felt.

Lyra, to her credit, seemed to hate beating around the bush as much as Rhea did. "Be honest with me. Is this all some massive, 4D chess conspiracy to get me to drop my guard?"

Rhea wasn't expecting a question like that at all, and neither was Iyo, judging by her utterly baffled expression. God, Rhea would have to explain what 4D chess was to sate her curiosity, but first she'd have to learn what 4D chess was herself. "Lyra, I'm going to say this as politely as I can, because you've always been kind to Iyo, but what the fuck are you on about?"

"Kairi!" Lyra exclaimed, as though that alone was enough to convey her worries. "Everyone is pretty sure she hates you two, but then everyone also thinks she was trying to screw me over by decking me, but that would mean she's with Dakota, and Dakota's with you two, and I just don't understand what's happening in this place anymore."

Well, Rhea couldn't fault her for that. She considered how confused she had been over the Sky Pirates' dynamic even with the wealth of information she had that Lyra lacked. From the outside, everything looked like a mess. They'd all seen the fans argue back and forth about who was going to turn on who next - with every theory came more

confusion, stepping them further and further from the comparatively simple reality. Conveying that truth would still take ages though, and was frankly none of the Irishwoman's business.

"Kairi hates all of us." Iyo summed it up without a fuss. "You're ok."

Lyra seemed not to expect that, taken aback by the bluntness. "Then... you aren't working with her?"

Iyo rolled her eyes, turning back towards the exit and tugging Rhea along, clearly finished with the interrogation. "No. Goodbye. Good luck."

Rhea didn't fight Iyo, but did call out a last set of words before the two rounded a corner and were out of sight of the bird lady, "Ask Kairi if you don't believe us!" And then, as soon as they had cleared the turn, Rhea burst into laughter, so tickled by Lyra's frustration that she couldn't keep a straight face any longer. "What's with all the crazy people in our orbit lately?"

"*You're* crazy," the Japanese woman countered playfully, bumping hips with the goth, her eyes glittering with mischief. Rhea didn't miss a beat, reaching down to slap her partner's ass lightly in mock offense.

"Crazy about you, maybe." Rhea had learned early in her life that the best way to deflect embarrassment was to go on the offensive, but Iyo was as slippery a foe as ever, her laughter echoing through the corridor as she danced out of range of Rhea's attempt at lifting her up, breaking into a run that left the younger woman no choice but to chase after her, the two dashing past a few bemused staff members packing up crates with equipment. "Come back here!"

"Nope!" Iyo was faster than Rhea, but the larger woman's long strides evened out the chase until she managed to grab hold of Iyo's waist, hauling her up and onto her shoulder in one go.

"Caught ya." Rhea squeezed the Japanese woman's thighs, enjoying the feel of her soft skin beneath her fingers, the muscles hidden beneath flexing in surprise. She was so strong for her size, and so much fun to tease, even funner to touch. It wasn't fair how much she tempted Rhea. The younger woman couldn't resist the urge to dig her fingertips in, massaging the flesh beneath as they made their way to their rental. Iyo didn't protest at all, seemingly fine with being toted around like Rhea's personal trophy, but she was far from passive. She took the time to play with Rhea's hair, twirling the strands of it around her fingers, humming softly as they went. It felt so easy, so normal, that

Rhea wondered how they ever thought of doing anything but this in their free time.

There was no way to go back to how things had been. The fear was still there - but so too was their ultimate, shared goal. Her heart might be able to wander a little freer, but until the gold was theirs, Rhea would never be sure that their time together wouldn't go up in smoke.

Chapter End Notes

> I may or may not have a bunch of outtakes from this chapter that ended up cut for tone and pacing issues that you might end up seeing in a oneshot collection anyway. Stupid sexy Flanders Rhiyo. So glad to get these damn Queenslayer brainworms out though. Over a year of this rattling around my brain… goddamn.
>
> Next up, I owe you guys some sad vampires. Cheers.

Chapter 10: calm

Chapter Notes

> sorry for the wait, gang. life does what it does. thank you for the patience and the love i've received, means a lot and does help motivate me to clock into my shift in the fic-writing mines... unfortunately, so does rhiyo-related tragedies. may our tag team live on in legend forevermore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On paper, life was perfect.

Iyo was happy. Blissfully so. Existence had become a series of strung-together glimmering highlights - a camera reel full to the brim of pictures she wouldn't trade for the world. Dinners prepared together, eaten under early evening light. Pets strewn across laps. A sunset through Rhea's window, red as desire. Rhea's shoulders, bare as sin. Rhea's hand, fingers twined through hers. Rhea's grin, bright and unashamed. Rhea, glasses perched on her nose during a quiet morning, red-on-black hair pulled up in a bun while reading through paperwork for them both. Iyo, as captured by Rhea's own hand, black-on-red hair spilling down her back in the shower; at the grocery store; at the park; at the gym; anywhere Rhea found an excuse to spirit her phone away and set to work.

As she lay in her bed, Iyo realized that moments weren't the sum of it. They were certainly no way to tell a story. The rest, the in-betweens, were the things Iyo had forgotten to wish for during the many other nights in her life she had spent like this: alone.

Across the hall, Rhea's room stood as a fortress, door shut against the possibility of any more snippets of happiness. Would that she could take back a second in time, rewind, and relive it all. But Iyo couldn't. She was stuck with eyes closed, remembering the cold blue of *hers* boring through her, right before the end.

Iyo pressed her thighs together, muting the ache that still pulsed there. Her body was certainly ignorant to her new lot in life: to be loved in part, and discarded in whole. There was no bitterness to that thought. Iyo had decided she would do anything to have Rhea. This was the cost.

One moment they had been going over gear selection, wandering through Rhea's wardrobe for some pop of colour that might lead toward something that read *them*. Somehow it had turned into Rhea's arms around her, blanketing her shoulders with the soft affection Iyo craved. The taller woman's hand had wandered only a little, brushing underneath the strap of Iyo's tank top. As for the rest, that had been Iyo's doing. It often was - presented with opportunity, she was a glutton for punishment.

The chaise lounge hadn't been christened yet. They'd changed that about as quickly as possible, and from there, it was a blur of hands, thighs, lips, landing at last in Rhea's bed. Iyo hadn't mastered the art of extending their trysts. All too soon there came a moment where, cresting off a peak, Rhea laid her down, brushed the hair from her face, and it was over.

She was becoming more and more gentle about it. Now, when she looked at Iyo with a gaze as clear as the sky, Iyo found it hard to argue. Still, she tried. A hand on Rhea's clothed hip. Her own look - what she hoped looked loving without verging on lost - and an offer on her tongue.

"You know I'm good, chipmunk. Getting you going is all I ever want."

A short while later, as always, Rhea excused herself to prepare for bed. Words unspoken since that first night swarmed in the silence. A gulf of abandonment expanded to fill a room that wasn't hers to inhabit. By the time Rhea returned, Iyo was gone. Or perhaps, more accurately: once Iyo left, Rhea slunk back in to reap her peace.

Any other time, except after, had fast become *every night alone.*

Rolling over, Iyo grabbed her phone from her bedside table and resigned herself to sleeplessness. It wasn't like her to take to scrolling through apps for the sake of it, and this late at night, she'd have to be overly cautious not to leave any traces Rhea might see and question. So much of their time was spent together that even little things like a burst of social media activity might summon up the question, *When did you have time to like a bunch of fanart?*

The answer, *When I was up in the middle of the night missing you*, wasn't worth the risk.

At least it gave her the opportunity to check in with everyone she had been neglecting in the midst of everything. The family group chat was just as lively without her, her sisters keeping everyone abreast of

every little goings-on in the way Iyo used to. Pictures of the kids, prepped meals, and a singular shot of their mother's butsudan filled the thread. Iyo wracked her brain, and found she couldn't even recall whose death anniversary she had missed. Guilt settled in her gut as she scrolled on. A picture of Mio sitting in her car outside the airport caught her eye. Who was coming, or who was going?

Iyo wanted to ask, but not as badly as she wanted to avoid the questions that might be directed her way. She hadn't talked to many people since this *thing* with Rhea began - as unsure what to call it as she was, trying to navigate those conversations wasn't a priority for the time being.

Some people didn't care about whether she had the words for it yet, though, a notification appearing across her screen from someone not so far off, without any time zones between them. For Dakota, late hours never seemed to factor into her texting habits.

Queen Kai

How're you and wifey doing?

Know we haven't gone through any major spot prep this year, but.. if I see you two chickies in there, I gotchu guys! PFC aren't gonna stand a chance against us

Iyo sighed. Close as they were, she had at least attempted to set the record straight with Dakota. While neither of them felt wholly comfortable discussing the finer details of the Rhea situation, the older woman remained steadfast that the romance portion of things would fall into place in short order.

She is not even my girlfriend

I am more worried about the Judgment Day. They are trouble.

**Future wifey.. I stand by it. I have my bridesmaid dress picked out already*

You're up late

Yeah…

I miss her so much. Even when she's here.

As soon as the text left Iyo's fingertips, she regretted it. Despite resolving to be as truthful as possible with Dakota, there was a whole

fathom of distance between being truthful, and leaving all the details of her pain in the open with someone who was also Rhea's friend.

The last thing Iyo wanted to do was make Rhea sound like some awful monster. She wasn't. She was a tender hearted, incredibly shielded woman whom Iyo loved with everything she had. A crash course in confusion. The type of woman who barely understood herself at times, relating more to cast-out creatures of the macabre than she did to her fellow living, breathing humans who only seemed capable of hurting others for the sake of it. She didn't blame Rhea for having built a wall around her heart. At least Iyo was given passage through it from time to time.

I remember how that feels. Wish I didn't.. 😞

Love you, Iyo. Don't make the same mistake I did by giving her room to get comfortable. She'll come around, but.. push her

It hurt to realize that for Dakota, it was Shayna who came to mind whenever the topic of emotional unavailability loomed close to the surface. Iyo hadn't meant to drag up old hurts. But then, maybe Dakota had already been ruminating on it. She had brought up PFC in the first place, after all. Perhaps Iyo wasn't the only one looking for a spot of reassurance hidden amidst the night's long memories.

Thank you. I love you too 💖

We will be beside you in the Rumble. We are unbeatable!!□✨✨🎉

Iyo believed it. She had to. Otherwise, what had she done all of this for?

Their bags were packed. Iyo had checked everything thrice, both hers and Rhea's luggage filled to the brim with everything they could possibly need over the weekend. The press schedule was light, which cut down on the amount of glitzy outfits they needed to prepare. Every bit of extra space was devoted to Rhea's hoodies. The Australian got cold easily, and Iyo didn't mind liberating a spare. It was a surefire way to make the younger woman's eyes glass over.

As far as the Rumble went, they wouldn't know their entry numbers

until the last possible moment. Preparation could only take them so far. The rest was a matter of burning through the anticipation. Come morning, they'd be on a flight to Indiana.

Iyo looked over to Rhea strewn across the couch. The lazy air about her was liminal. With mere hours to go, filling the space felt impossible. The Japanese woman had never figured out how to count down these scraps of time, either.

She took one last inventory check and zipped everything shut, leaving their bags to wait in the entranceway, just as aimless as they were. Rhea shifted, rolling her head toward the hallway, making a low sound of summons. The light of the television cast a blue haze through the living room. On it droned some cooking competition Iyo didn't know the rules of. The lull was a comfort through the silence as she slid under Rhea's outstretched arm, settling against her partner's chest like they'd been made to fit.

"Munchkin," the Australian woman muttered against her temple, lips pressing into Iyo's hairline. "You changed your contact name again." She wiggled her phone towards Iyo as if to brandish the evidence before a jury.

Among other boundaries that had disappeared over time, their respective privacy in that realm was officially in the dust. If a phone was close at hand, it was fair game. Their small circle of friends had for the most part gotten used to receiving texts from both of them from one another's devices, and if one wasn't replying, messages often got sent to the other in place. Codependent as they might be, it was convenient, especially so for Iyo, who was perpetually forgetting where she last set down her own phone. Rhea was the more organized of the two there, and had become the default keeper of both their devices as a result.

Iyo huffed, pointing in mock offense at **weird japanese girl** , which had already replaced her stellar offering of a textless line of emojis that she felt summed up their relationship well enough on their own. "You need better names. I am not weird."

Rhea chuckled. The low vibration of it against her ear reminded Iyo of thunder, a sound that brought with it feelings of both cozy comfort and potential danger, depending only on the proximity to the flash of light preceding it. "You are. Weirdly perfect." The goth's fingers toyed with the strands of Iyo's hair, brushing it off of one shoulder to better expose the skin of her neck, her breath warm as her mouth ghosted a

line along her throat.

"You have dead things on your walls," the Japanese woman muttered in a half-hearted deflection, even as she opened herself up, tilting her head to better grant access. Her pulse thrummed at the feel of teeth grazing her flesh. This was how it always began.

"Mm," the Australian hummed, fingers drawing circles along the column of Iyo's neck, trailing up to her jaw to hold her delicately in place. The tip of Rhea's tongue traced her skin. Iyo felt the scrape of her canines, light enough that they wouldn't mark. The larger woman rumbled low against the flesh, sending a shiver through Iyo. "Crazy Japanese girl, then."

Iyo made a sound she hoped would read as indignant despite the low fire being stoked in her. Swivelling her hips, she rolled over so that they lay chest-to-chest, the smaller woman's weight pressing her partner into the cushions, a playful glare shot across the few inches that separated them.

"...Japanese girl I'm crazy about?" Rhea amended, eyes glinting in the low light. The smirk on her lips betrayed the attempt to smooth the situation over, and yet the words struck Iyo regardless. She knew better than to take Rhea's teasing to heart, but still she felt the flutter in her chest as her heart pounded out a hopeful rhythm. It was the closest she would get.

That didn't mean Iyo couldn't still try to push for a bit more. "Keep trying," she chastised, her own smirk growing as she toyed with the collar of Rhea's shirt, watching the way colour wicked under her skin in response, painting her pale flesh a delicate red.

Rhea's fingers slid up the back of her shirt, scraping her nails along the line of the smaller woman's spine. "Come on, yours are no better. *Dog Mami*?"

Proof enough that it was mostly Iyo who spent time poking through her other half's phone, then. A little, wry laugh escaped from Iyo before she could think about how Rhea might interpret it. “I changed that last week.”

Specifically, she had changed it in the little hours following their first night together - when Rhea lay asleep and ignorant to the turmoil flitting through Iyo, left to wonder if she had made a massive misstep in opening herself up. All she had thought then was that the name sounded far too domestic, a potential clue towards how she truly felt

about the woman who couldn't stand to sleep beside her. It hadn't been rational, or fair. But Iyo needed a bit of distance - needed to look at their texts back and forth and not immediately think of Rhea like this life was theirs to share.

Even now, the playful crinkle of Rhea's eyes at the edges made clear that in some things, they weren't a set. Small reassurances that Rhea still failed to read Iyo's innermost feelings. Her hands smoothed over Iyo's sides, ticklish and teasing at the line between what they were and what Iyo wanted them to be. "Well, what am I now?"

Iyo leaned away to scoop up her phone from the coffee table, breaking Rhea's hold on her in the process. Her voice shook a little as she spoke, her Japanese coming deep and hesitant, "*Konichiwa* Siri, bodyguard *ni denwa*."

Rhea hiccuped out a scoff of disbelief, smile falling. "*Bodyguard*. And you're complaining about mine?"

If Iyo let herself believe for a moment, it almost looked like Rhea was offended by the prospect. An ego wounded at the implication of being demoted to something as impersonal as that. Rhea had made fun of Iyo for the *Dog Mami* nickname in the first place, as with all of Iyo's small gestures that edged on cloyingly romantic. Iyo had never thought Rhea would possibly miss something like that when she still got everything else she wanted out of the smaller woman.

Guilt seeped in. Iyo's voice softened, coaxing the struck look out of the cagey woman. "*My* bodyguard. With emoji," she leaned back in toward Rhea to show her, pressing the curve of her cheek into the strong shoulder of her partner, "Look, see. Smiley. Flex. And sparkly heart. For pretty."

"Hmph," Rhea turned up her chin, a stubborn glower overtaking her features. The Australian turned her nose away from Iyo's proffered screen, as if the name was now so grievous a slight that it wasn't even worth being seen. "... *Tag Team Partner* work for you?"

It was Iyo's turn to feel wounded, a sharp pain seeping through her ribs, strangling the air from her lungs as she stared up at the woman she had given herself to. While Rhea was still in the dark about how Iyo felt, she certainly knew how to petulantly hurt her to make a point. "No," she replied quietly, slumping off of Rhea's lap. "That's worse."

The couch dipped under the shift in their weight. The silence that

spread between them was vast, broken at last by Rhea giving a long, slow exhale. "I'll figure out something else if you do." She sounded tired. Stress was getting to them both, making them sharp with each other when they should have been anything but. "There's something wrong with me," the Australian confessed, "I don't know how to be sincere."

Iyo turned her head, her lover's profile lit in a wash of blue, eyes clouded into nothing. Lost and in need of love. It was wrong of Iyo to restrict what she could give when it spilled out of her copiously one way or another. Courage came to her, fingers reaching out through the dark to find Rhea, already reaching back toward her.

They tumbled down together, Iyo pressed between the softness of the couch and the hard lines of Rhea's body atop her, arms winding about her partner's neck to bring her in for the kiss they both needed - had all day, in the hours they spent flitting about and worrying over what was still to come. Rhea's mouth parted over hers, yielding in the only manner she ever did for the smaller woman. Iyo sighed against her, taking her fill, stoking the same neediness that always drew her to this moment, time and again.

Iyo was careful with her hands. There had been a time or two already she had followed instinct, caressing at Rhea's skin in the midst of a lustful haze, and found her touch rebuked by a flinch. So she kept her fingertips light, playing along the edges of her lover. As Rhea became more daring with the drag of her tongue against Iyo's, the smaller woman dared in tandem, cupping at her partner's cheek, guiding the pace she craved. When she couldn't hold back any longer, her hand dipped down along the swell of Rhea's rear, drawing her down until they lay flush.

Rhea groaned, a soft noise muffled against the Japanese woman's lips. She broke away to pant against Iyo's cheek. The smell of her draped them in familiarity. The taller woman's hips stuttered, and Iyo's hand guided the motion again, traversing her way beneath the loose shirt Rhea wore. She found the line of a hipbone, fingertips pulling against smooth flesh.

"Rhea," Iyo breathed, emotions warring inside her at odds with the pressure of the larger woman against her. Want clouded her thoughts. Her eyes stung as Rhea's mouth found her again, biting tenderly at Iyo's lower lip. She loved this woman, and it hurt. It hurt to be loved back only like this, in moments that never lingered long. When Rhea's hands wandered beneath the band of Iyo's pants, she pushed at the

larger woman's shoulders, a whimper of regret leaving her at the wounded sound Rhea made in protest. "Not tonight."

Her lover froze against her. The line of Rhea's jaw held tense, pulling back enough to evaluate what had gone wrong, confusion written across her features. Iyo feared she had made a terrible misstep. A small eternity passed, the Australian's gaze boring into her before at last she made answer, voice hoarse as she bumbled her way through an acknowledgement. "Oh. Um, yeah, of course. No drama." Her partner shifted her weight as though to get off of her, eyes glassed-over and lip tucked tight between her teeth. In that split-second, Iyo decided not to let her, clinging to her with a force that left little room to argue. Rhea gave a rasp of surprise. "Iyo?"

Sometimes being able to read Rhea like this was a curse. Her breath came in long, hard pulls, the tension thrumming through her crystal clear. Heated as she was, a bit of sweat glistened on her temple. If Rhea let Iyo, she'd stay right where she was, and be as much for the other woman as she could be.

"Do you want me to-" The words choked in Iyo's throat as she dipped her chin in gesture, the offer plain.

"I-" The arousal in Rhea's eyes melted to an expression of pain. Her mouth twisted into something like a pout, vulnerability rolling across her strong face. "No, no. I'm cool." Her gaze darted to the side as though embarrassed to have been caught out, weight atop Iyo shifting restlessly. It was as difficult for her to be there as it was for the Japanese woman. "I can take care of it later. We're fine."

Fine. A word Iyo had learned was used to dismiss rather than describe. She could feel the tremors that wracked Rhea's body, her breathing a struggle. Every dip of her eyes back towards Iyo were laden with desire, hurting every bit as much as the love that pooled through Iyo's veins hurt. The older woman frowned. There was so much that Rhea wouldn't let her say or do, but Iyo knew the one thing that was inexplicably allowed, no matter where they were or who was watching. She sat up as far as she was able, Rhea's arms supporting her the whole way. "We can still kiss... if it would help." Her own voice felt small to her. Could that alone make up for the fathomless distance between their hearts?

"Yeah?" Relief washed over Rhea's features in answer. Her gaze flitted down to Iyo's mouth and back up again, the darkness in her expression clearing to something warmer, bordering on thankful. A

crooked grin worked its way onto her lips, reminding Iyo of the young woman she had first met years ago before the world had truly sunk its teeth into them both. Back when hurt was something that came and went, rather than staying to terrorize. It made her wonder how many nights Rhea had spent alone, longing for a bit of kindness that she couldn't bring herself to ask for. "That'd be good."

The kiss they fell back into was different from before. Unhurried and soft, Rhea melting atop Iyo. She wound her fingers into the smaller woman's hair as though afraid of some indeterminate end. Rhea was always so much more affectionate when the fear got to her - all her defences blown wide under the threat of losing one of the few things in the world she still had.

Once the tension had fully eased from Rhea's body, the older woman broke away with a smile that came easily. She twirled one of Rhea's sparse red locks around a finger, admiring the evidence of how wound up in one another they could get.

"You wanna cuddle tonight?" Rhea offered, sounding much less affected than she looked.

A light sparked in Iyo's chest. For all their time spent together on the road, all their time living together, the moments shared in the most intimate of ways, Rhea hadn't ever let Iyo into her space at home like that. Snippets in the dark on lonely nights, only to be cast out in the end were one thing. An honest, genuine invitation to share Rhea's space, without any secondary expectations... that was novel.

Iyo craned her neck to peck her lover's lips, a sweet grin spreading across her lips, "Yes. I'd really like that."

The smile on Rhea's face was worth whatever the morning after might bring.

First wasn’t any wrestler’s preferred entry number. Iyo was as well equipped as any for the task, but near to an hour in, her energy had flagged - her co-starter, Roxanne, didn’t fare much better as the numbers climbed towards the finale. A swarm of activity surrounded them in the ring. At one point, Stephanie Vaquer had come in and dragged the spitfire prodigy off of her, giving her the chance to slip to

the safety of the turnbuckle. Iyo could barely catch her breath in the scant seconds between assaults, her eyes darting around the arena as she looked for a friendly face, any at all, to align with in the late moments.

At last, she caught Dakota's gaze from across the way, the Kiwi breaking from a scuffle with Zoey to dash her way. "Let's do this, babe," she grinned. They were both winded, adrenaline alone keeping them up. As Stark rallied, she brought her own backup alongside her - whatever brief power struggle had ensued within the PFC gone in the moment of war. Dakota was all in with Iyo, the two of them rushing forward like mirror images of one another - sweeping out Zoey and Sonya's legs from under them before standing to evaluate the last woman up - Shayna.

A cacophony of sound erupted as the next entrant's music hit. The roar of the fans nearly shook the ring, purple lights arcing across the crowd in an all-too-familiar flash. The three of them stopped dead, turning to watch Rhea appear like the woman of battle she was. The Australian strode out, head held high, looking over the arena as if to survey the scope of the ring she would inevitably conquer.

Shayna stirred from her reverie first with the urgency of a woman who realized her numbers advantage had vanished, and her minutes left going with it. One moment, Iyo was upright - the next, Shayna's leg hooked around hers, and she was being driven down into the mat. Sonya was back up to trade blows with Dakota, leaving Iyo to scramble for freedom, shoulder straining under the force of Shayna's hold. She kicked at her opponent with the one foot she was able to lever against the mat, her heel striking out at Shayna's side. Pain rocketed through her ankle with each failed attempt, her every muscle burning.

"Come on, give it up!" Shayna snarled down at her, sweat dripping down her face. "The tough act is cute, but it's getting old, Iyo."

"Shut up," the Japanese woman gritted out. She had so many more choice words for the Submission Magician, those born from years of fighting this same fight, feeling these same pains at her hand. Words she could spit out in her native tongue that she knew would be understood just as easily, but saying anything more would be a waste of breath. She had to stay cool. Had to stay calm, had to-

Shayna gave a sudden cry as her grip loosened, Iyo scrambling up to see Rhea hauling her up from behind as though the woman weighed

nothing. Anger radiated off of the Eradicator, a scowl etched on her lips. "Picked the wrong one."

A moment later, Shayna was tumbling to the mat outside, the fans cheering madly. Rhea didn't give her another moment's glance, instead turning to take in the field. Sonya and Zoey had Dakota pushed up into a corner, scrabbling to push her out. Iyo distantly felt her knees scream with the effort of getting up after such an ordeal, but it was secondary to instinct. Rhea was right behind her, the two of them turning their majority against their enemies at a moment's notice.

They shoved, they fought. Rhea sent Sonya reeling out. As Dakota grappled with Zoey, Iyo dashed in to knock at Zoey's knees from behind, destabilizing her enough for Dakota to scoop the blonde up onto her shoulders. One throw later, Zoey was down and out. The remaining three stood, panting, evaluating - an atoll of calm surrounded by a maelstrom of combat.

Then, Asuka's music struck. For an instant, Iyo's vision tunneled to a pinprick, the crowd noise dropping to an echoing din.

Iyo remembered staring at her family group chat, so uncaring of the rest of the world's movements that she had only wondered for a brief moment at the sight of Mio at the airport - at once it was obvious. Asuka's silence towards Iyo, Iyo's silence towards Asuka, all radiating from that late-night conversation held in front of the women who flanked her. In Asuka's absence, Damage Ctrl had crumpled away into something else, all titles fading to distant dreams, injuries cropping up in place as an unshakable plague.

All she could possibly focus on through the pounding of blood through her ears was the faint sound of Rhea's voice, targeted not towards her, but to Dakota. So confused, so small despite the power in her stance. "Did you know-?"

Whatever Dakota's answer was didn't reach her. Asuka had stepped out onto the stage, taking her spot there at the head of it. Her smile was wide and wicked. An expression meant for the camera, for the crowd, for the ring. Meant for her.

Meant to dismantle her piece by piece.

Iyo's stomach turned, fear rooting her feet to the floor even as a mass of women surged towards their little, broken group. Rhea grabbed toward Iyo's wrist, all too late, the pair of her and Dakota scooped up and away by a mass of bodies - Roxy and Naomi and Bianca and

Raquel and Stephanie, all stumbling into the ropes before at last, surging in like a dirge, Nia knocked them all in a heap to the floor, Rhea left to watch the wreckage with despair on her face.

Asuka stopped before their tangled bodies. Some little part of Iyo hoped she would somehow escape notice below everyone else, but luck wasn't on her side. Perhaps it never would be again. The Empress' gaze burned. As the mass of women rolled away, dispersing with aching bodies and disappointed hearts, Asuka lingered only long enough to stare witheringly at Iyo. "Disappointing."

In that one word, Asuka said everything Iyo needed to know about how their reunion would go.

Rhea had at least lasted long enough to see the final entrant and enact vengeance on Nia for taking out her few allies. They watched it unfold seconds after limping into the back, Bianca muttering a simple, "Damn," when moments after lifting Nia up and over the ropes, Charlotte cleared the Eradicator from the field as well.

Eventually, all that remained was Charlotte and Asuka. For once in her life, Iyo didn't care to watch the finish, slipping away to meet Rhea on the way back. They walked to the med room together, arms linked to help keep each other aloft. Dakota would let them know how the rest went one way or the other. For the moment, Iyo was focused only on Rhea's soft mutters and grumbles that were too low for her to fully understand. She was able to get the gist of things regardless - frustration and pain and bitter anger. The very same things she felt.

"She's mad, huh?" Rhea muttered the instant the medical staff left them be, ice packs applied and cuts tended to. Iyo looked at Rhea's face, a shadow already creeping in under one eye, and wondered if Asuka had been responsible for it.

"Yeah," she replied. While it didn't seem like Rhea expected any further explanation, one bubbled out of Iyo anyway. "I am a bad friend, maybe." Rhea's face twisted in discomfort, an argument clearly sitting heavy on the back of her tongue. She stayed quiet, though, listening as Iyo got out the guilty thoughts that had been plaguing her for far longer than the mere last half-hour of suffering. "I don't talk to them. I hid from her at home. I come back, and I do the same. I ...

forget. There's another world, people who need me. I forget everything that isn't-"

Iyo stopped herself just shy of the precipice, her fingers twining together as her hands dropped into her lap.

"I have a lot less going on in my life than you do," Rhea murmured in the ensuing quiet, voice carrying no judgment. Her attention fixed at some point on the wall, fingers running along the seam of the ice pack she held to her ribs. "And even then, I'm shit at juggling it all. How are you supposed to manage them, and me, and yourself? Far as I'm concerned, we can take a backseat for you."

Sometimes it was stupid how selfless Rhea could be. A woman who by her own admission had so few people in her corner, willingly accepting that she didn't have to be someone's main priority in return. That wasn't how it worked for Iyo, though. Pulled in a million directions though she might be, her first instinct was to tend to the woman who needed her the most.

"You are not my backseat, you're my partner," Iyo swore. Her next admission was harder to work through, the old hurts still pricking at her heart, "I didn't have anyone for a long time. Kairi left me to chase her own dreams, and Asuka didn't care about me until I had a title." It sounded ugly, and it was. For however much Iyo beat herself up over not being there for her friends and family, every person was selfish at times.

She didn't blame anyone for the years she spent being no one's priority. Perhaps it was time to stop blaming herself for deciding to be happy on her own terms. If Asuka thought Kairi needed someone to look out for her, then that duty would lay with Asuka for the time being. Iyo could stomach being a disappointment for a time.

"I'm not leaving you, Rhea." Iyo scooted the short distance to Rhea, their thighs pressing together, Iyo's head resting against her partner's shoulder. "You are stuck with me."

The soft smile that bloomed over Rhea's face was unusual. Though she was still decked out in full gear, the Eradicator was nowhere to be seen, the sunny nature of her Rhea - the one found in slow mornings and late nights - bloomed in her stead. "Then I'm lucky. You're kind of my favourite person."

So they didn't win the Rumble. Asuka was back. Kairi was somewhere, licking her wounds and probably watching their every move with a

sort of paranoid obsession. Enemies lurked around every corner. It didn't matter. Iyo knew who remained.

Debriefing happened in the middle of a bowling alley in Cleveland. There had been little point in heading home after the Rumble only to fly out the following day. Their wallets could take a bit of extra damage for the sake of some relaxation. Despite touting itself as a premier attraction, the alley was mostly abandoned at ten AM on a Sunday - save for a couple of kids playing air hockey in the back, and the hung-over looking college kid manning the desk.

They helped themselves to the furthest-off lane, Iyo tucking herself into the back corner of the too-large booth. Across from her, Dakota picked at a greasy pizza that she'd ordered on impulse. Luckily or unluckily, the lone staff member didn't seem too fussed about off-hours service. A couple plastic cups of cheap beer sat between them. Rhea had already finished her own and started on Iyo's in between chucking ball after ball down the lane with an air of ferocity. Whatever it took to get the stress out.

"So, qualifiers." Dakota started in on what they all were already thinking about, her tongue swiping along the edge of her thumb to clean a bit of sauce off of it. The list had emerged over the course of the previous night into the wee hours of the morning, while the three of them were still being shuttled from one city to the next. They'd all known to stay ready, but with the list looming before them now, reality was sinking in.

"Yep." Rhea popped the P, sending off another ball. It struck at an angle, all the remaining pins scattered by its force. Another spare. She made her way back to the table, scooping Iyo out of the booth so that the smaller woman could take her turn, swatting at her ass unsubtly.

Dakota didn't bat an eyelash at the affectionate gesture. "Be sure to give Bayley all our love, yeah?"

"I can handle that." The Australian snorted. "Sorry you got left off the list."

The Kiwi waved off the apology, her voice taking on a lightness that belied her words. "It's fine, I gotta focus on my rematch anyway."

"You will do great," Iyo called from where she stood at the end of the lane, sizing up the ball she had just picked. She looked at it with disdain before setting it back on the return to select another. While she was no expert, she was pretty sure the more colourful stripes the ball had, the faster it would go, but it was hard to say which colour combination would result in the best luck. Iyo settled on pink and yellow.

The Japanese woman lined up her throw, and missed all but two pins. Rhea laughed heartily from where she lounged, one arm hooked around the back of the booth as she leaned back and sipped at Iyo's beer. "Genius of the Lanes."

Iyo huffed, adjusting her posture as the return spat her unlucky ball back out. She picked up a solid purple one instead. "You are lucky I love you."

With Dakota there, saying it felt safer than Iyo might have expected. Her heart hammered, but her mind was calm as Rhea tipped her head to the side in a grin, the taller woman not seeming to find it at all out of the ordinary for the smaller to casually profess her feelings. "Yeah? You better." Her smirk turned to light, bemused giggles as Iyo threw a complete gutterball. "That was worse. You're really shit at bowling, babe."

Dakota rolled her eyes as she stood to take her turn. "Remember when I called you two lovebirds? I take it back, you're like cats and dogs." She paused, watching the way Rhea opened her arms up for Iyo to fall back into with a petulant pout. "Really absurdly cuddly cats and dogs."

Little point arguing that, Iyo thought as Rhea pressed a quick kiss to her mouth, interrupted only by Dakota making exaggerated heaving sounds. The two of them turned their attention to Rhea's phone, skimming through the ever-malleable schedule for the next few weeks, and more importantly, the next day's card. Rhea wasn't the only one with a bout scheduled - Shayna and Iyo's names lay next to each other in bold, set to open the show. That wasn't a rematch Iyo was looking forward to. Despite having some group wins under her belt against Shayna, the prospect of fighting one-on-one always had her on edge.

As though sensing Iyo's doubts, Dakota glanced back at them. "Don't let her into your head before you're even in the ring with her, chicky."

Iyo sighed. She hadn't said a word, and still her best friend was reading her like an open book. "She's-"

"She's someone you've been facing down for years. She hasn't changed, but you have." Rhea had an oddly focused look on her face as she interrupted Iyo, cutting through her doubts with a knife's edge of certainty. "It's Shayna, she's going to focus on any weakness she can. Fuck, throw her off, feign some shit and get her where you need her."

It wasn't the advice Iyo had expected from the Australian, given how straightforward Rhea tended to be. But flickers of the conniving woman of the Judgment Day were still in there, eager to share her experiences in any way that would help. Iyo had seen the way her lover played with her food before devouring them whole, all the little games and the viciousness that Rhea could employ when her mean streak surfaced.

"Damn straight," Dakota turned back after casually bowling a strike, setting her once more firmly ahead of the other two. Not that Iyo's score was anywhere near competitive. "She's got an absurd ego. Use it against her."

Beside her, Rhea wiggled her way out of the booth, nudging Iyo out with her before scooping her up onto her back. "C'mon, teamwork. We're gonna get her."

"What?" The smaller woman laughed in surprise as she was hoisted up, her arms latching around Rhea's neck to secure herself as the Australian walked them towards the lane. "How is this teamwork?"

"You're my counterbalance. It's science." The taller woman sounded completely serious as she approached the ball return. "Pick one for me." Rhea waited, arms hooked under Iyo's knees as Iyo reached to grab the same pink-and-yellow ball that had disappointed her sorely before.

Dakota surveyed them with a shake of her head, "You're both so dumb." Her smile said anything but, hiding her face with her hand as she sank back into the booth. Out of the corner of Iyo's eye, she caught the Kiwi pulling her phone up to record, no doubt for a future ribbing.

With Iyo on her back, Rhea shifted to take the ball from her, leaving the smaller woman to hold herself aloft - ankles crossed around Rhea's waist, arms grasped about her neck in something more like a submission move than a loving hold. Rhea's long, loose hair tickled at Iyo's nose. Her lover smelled of the same candy-scented, colour-safe shampoo that Iyo always used on the road, robbed away that very

morning.

"Ready?"

Iyo pressed her forehead to Rhea's shoulder. "Yes."

They lost handily to Dakota. But they were happy to do so.

That night saw them curled up on the hotel queen-sized together, another one of Rhea's favourite slasher movies on the screen in front of them. The younger woman's fingers were woven through Iyo's hair. She didn't mean to, surely, but the hold kept the Japanese woman in place, absorbing the nauseating sights that unfolded. Dread crept up Iyo's throat at every jumpscare, swallowing back her nausea at each new, brutal scene.

In contrast, Rhea was perfectly at home, eyes wide and excited as the gore splattered across the screen in vibrant colour. Her joy was the one redeemable feature in the whole experience for Iyo. With a rising tide of sound - sinister stings and screams in tandem - Iyo squeezed her eyes shut against the sight of a blade slicing a crimson arc through the air, head turning until her nose was buried against Rhea's sweater. "This is scary."

A chuckle came low and rumbling, reverberating through their entwined bodies. Fingers tugged teasingly at her hair, Rhea's other arm looping around her shoulders to draw her in even closer, her body language protective despite the words that spilled out, "You're the one who said we could watch it. I thought you were getting used to these."

Iyo pouted, eyes still shut tight against the sounds of violence. "You get happy when we do."

The younger woman hummed. A long moment stretched, the sounds on screen dying down, the sound of the goth's breathing replacing the torture. Iyo opened her eyes to look up at Rhea. She was looking down at her fondly, the sight making the blood rise in Iyo's cheeks.

"You're too cute." The television clicked off, Iyo blinking a few times to adjust to the sudden dim. In her brain, the sound of screams still

rattled around, the imagery she'd just taken in flashing behind her eyelids.

Their career was built on violence, but it was controlled, calculated hurt. Iyo had never liked the sight of blood, and had never been comfortable seeing the damage that her body could cause to another person. Even the ones who deserved it. Worse was the thought of herself, or those she cared about being wounded so severely. Rhea was the opposite, a predator through and through, one that sometimes needed to let the beast out and rampage. A woman who had been hurt grievously before, and used it all as fuel for her art. It spiked anxiety through Iyo. It was all too real, the sounds of violence, of fear and desperation.

A thumb swiped along her cheekbone, catching the tear that threatened to spill. "Oh, you're actually freaked." Rhea whispered contritely, shifting to lay Iyo down, looming over her with a heavy air of concern. "I'm sorry chipmunk, I didn't realize."

The younger woman looked so soft in the dim light of the hotel room. Iyo lifted a hand, brushing Rhea's long, loose hair away from her face, admiring the barely-visible lines etched across her by stress and happiness both. She wanted to say so many things. To explain the fears that plagued her when she thought about those moments that had nearly torn them apart from one another, the feelings she had when Rhea looked at her after Iyo took a hard hit, or took a daring risk just because she thought it would make for a great spot. How they compared to those she felt when she witnessed Rhea ganged up on, outnumbered and alone.

Blood flashed in Iyo's mind again, and she closed her eyes against it, her hand sliding to the nape of Rhea's neck to tug her down until their foreheads rested against each other's.

"Please," she whispered into the breath of space that remained between their mouths, "Be gentle?"

"Of course." Rhea murmured the promise into Iyo's skin, her touch tender. The woman was a compelling blend of loving and vicious, a paradox given flesh. The kiss that found her was soft, Rhea's hands bracketing her head as she sank into Iyo. All she needed was to forget. Everything melted away but the sweet curl of Rhea's fingers along her jaw, working the breath from her.

For a time, that's all there was, the equal exchange of pants and gasps

as they kissed, hands wandering. Iyo shuddered at the first brush of her lover's fingertips against the hem of her shirt, fabric rucked up enough for the larger woman to paw at her abdomen, thumb stroking along her hip.

At last, the Australian tugged at Iyo's night shirt, pulling it up and off. She rolled them over, letting Iyo straddle her chest as the article of clothing was tossed to the wayside. A breath left Iyo's mouth, sighing out the shape of Rhea's name at the feeling of nails digging into the Japanese woman's waist. Rhea wasted no time in mouthing against Iyo's clothed sex, tongue teasing along the dampened fabric.

A sound caught in her throat, knees pressed to the sheets on either side of Rhea's head. The goth's tongue prodded against her, finding her clit through the cotton with unerring precision. Her mouth was hot and demanding, coaxing slick from Iyo's cunt until her underwear stuck to her every curve. Her thighs shook with the effort of keeping herself upright, collapsing against the headboard to support herself, hips rolling to meet the pressure of Rhea's lips and tongue.

"Rhea," her voice came breathy and strained, nails scraping against wood and wallpaper.

The woman below her pulled back, fingers hooking into Iyo's waistband to drag the last barrier down her legs. "Yeah?" Rhea cooed, pressing her nose against the soft rise of Iyo's stomach.

Iyo couldn't find the words. Couldn't do anything except lift her weight for the second it took Rhea to slip her underwear off before dropping back onto Rhea's waiting tongue.

A ragged sound of appreciation spilled from her lover's mouth at the taste of her, Rhea's tongue sliding along her slit. She dipped the tip of it inside to collect more of Iyo before returning to the woman's sensitive clit, flicking her pierced tongue over it relentlessly. The Japanese woman rocked down, riding her face in abandon. Sounds of Rhea's own pleasure spilled from beneath her, muffled by the press of Iyo's cunt against her mouth.

Her lover's tongue sank inside of her again. A groan of approval vibrated through her at the sensation of Rhea's nose pressed flush against her, tongue buried to the root. The enthusiasm with which she worked stole every other thought from Iyo. There was nothing to worry about while Rhea's mouth was on her, their worlds collapsing into a singularity of togetherness. The goth's nails raked up the backs

of Iyo's thighs, leaving raised red trails that the smaller woman relished. They'd show in the morning, an inescapable reminder that she was wanted.

"*More,*" She begged in her mother tongue, hands falling to bracket Rhea's head, fingers tangling in her hair like a lifeline. "*Please, need you-*"

"Fuck, you're hot," Rhea breathed out against her, lips glistening with the evidence of Iyo's want. The smaller woman squirmed atop her, trying to reclaim that delicious pressure, but Rhea held her steady, just shy of where she needed to be. "Say my name again. I love hearing you like this."

The words had an electric effect on her. It had taken her some time to acclimate to how quickly Rhea could turn from hesitant to a driving, wanting force. All it took was a brief reminder to ruin her. "Rhea," she keened in obedience, "*Inside me.*"

The goth's eyes gleamed through the darkness. Rhea's lips crashed back to Iyo's clit, tongue lapping against her as two fingers pressed against her slit, sinking in to the knuckle. Iyo hissed out her pleasure, hips twitching forward to chase the pressure inside. Rhea didn't relent, her fingers crooking forward to meet Iyo at her favourite angle, stroking her higher with practiced ease. Neither did her mouth let up, the sensation of the cool steel piercing paired with the heat of Rhea's tongue on her tipping her towards the brink.

Rhea hummed against her, pleased with her handiwork. She knew Iyo was close, and adjusted the pace accordingly, slowing down to let her ride out her building orgasm, winding higher and higher until she reached the breaking point. With one last thrust, paired with the crescent-moon press of Rhea's nails along Iyo's thigh, Iyo let herself go, body quaking as she rode the Australian's tongue to her end.

The only thing that kept her from collapsing entirely was Rhea, drawing her down into soft sheets and a welcoming embrace. Iyo buried her face against her lover's neck, panting softly, letting her heartbeat return to normal. Sweat-slicked hair stuck to her forehead, Rhea pushing it aside tenderly.

The Australian leaned down to kiss her, letting her taste her own slick. Her tongue curled against the older woman's, a hand lifting to tangle into the long crimson strands of Iyo's hair, combing through it before letting her grasp fall, fingers folding through Iyo's own in place.

"Are you okay, sunshine?" Rhea whispered against her mouth.

"Mhm," Iyo murmured in turn, blushing still at the sight of a bit of herself smeared on Rhea's chin. She reached up with the hand that wasn't laced through her lover's to wipe at her skin. Rhea caught her on the way back, curling her tongue around the length of Iyo's index finger to suck it clean before letting her go. Iyo let her finger slide from Rhea's mouth, feeling a little dizzy. "I... should shower. Again." A bit of anxiety spiked back into her at the thought of returning to the room - their room, with all the rules of engagement dictating how to behave, how to be, after sex. "You can have the bed. I'll sleep on the couch."

A furrow appeared between Rhea's brows, confusion written across her face. "What?"

Embarrassed heat flared on Iyo's face. "I'm not going to kick you out of bed," she explained haltingly, her gaze falling away. The cordoned-off section of her heart that was responsible for dispensing hope thumped hard, screaming at her to look at the sick, sad longing that was reflected on Rhea's face.

She rolled away, and tried to take a step away from the bed, only for her wrist to be seized by Rhea, getting to her feet in a panicked rush. "...then don't." Rhea's voice was shot through with nerves. "Stay tonight." Iyo looked at her at last, her heart aching at the desperation etched into her face. Rhea's eyes shone, dampened by fear. "I don't want you to go."

Confusion licked through Iyo. Nothing in how Rhea was acting suddenly made any sense - the tenderness of the weekend bleeding over and marring the freshly drawn lines Iyo had barely come to terms with. It wasn't Iyo's rule after all. It was Rhea's. The one that Iyo never overstepped. Never dared, lest it all come crumbling down around her. If she were to ever beg Rhea like this, she was sure the younger woman would know just how badly Iyo loved her, and that would be the end.

But there they stood, on the precipice of something greater - and Rhea was the one asking for it.

Who was Iyo to refuse?

Chapter End Notes

for every bsky signup i will reduce the time it takes me to

update by one day. this is a threat to the rhiyo twitterverse. do urself a favour.

Chapter 11: before

Chapter Notes

rhiyo nation are we alive out there still?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nothing amazed Rhea more than Damian actually answering her call at 7am on a Monday. First try, no less.

The Starbucks drive through was packed. For the kind of lifestyle Rhea was accustomed to, it seemed like an absurd hour for that level of bustle. Despite that, she was grateful - it gave her the chance to talk things over with Priest without drumming up too much suspicion over being out too long. She took a quick picture of the circuitous line weaving around the parking lot and sent it Iyo's way for the sake of deniability.

genius of my heart (too much…)

FML dude.

Get an extra set in for me I fuckin guess

Why so busy!

I hope ube matcha does not sell out…

If it does I'll go to another store for you

Don't!! Waste of gas. Bad.

I can have a latte. It is ok

No way. Need you in tip top fighting shape. Purple yams only!!!

"I can hear you texting her," Damian rumbled. He sounded just as unamused as whenever he had been forced to lecture Dom back in the day. Circumstances changed, but his tough love demeanour never did. "First you wake me up to crash out, then you tell me you're hooking up with her and I'm not even the first to know, and now you're zoned out flirting."

Figured he'd be dramatic about being mildly out of the loop. That, too, was a constant with him. For all their time together, Rhea had

never adapted to how much of a drama queen Priest could be. Funny. He hadn't been complaining a few minutes prior when she'd fessed up to the recent developments in her Iyo… situation. Far from it. He'd whooped and laughed like it was the best news he'd ever heard. If only Rhea could rewind back the rest of the conversation before he realized that development hadn't *just* happened.

Instead of arguing any more, Rhea sighed deeply, biting her tongue for the sake of maintaining one of the few friendships she had. Her words came out tersely despite her best effort. "I told you I'm sorry. You're literally only second to Dakota."

He gave a dry laugh, as used to her grouchiness as she was to his dramatics. "A brother's gone from RAW for a couple of weeks and you choose exactly then to land a girlfriend."

That, too, was where their talk had gone sideways. "She is not my girlfriend," Rhea repeated. "Nothing has changed there. Tag titles first, destroying everything I have with her, second."

"You're only going to destroy it by keeping it to yourself. Bottling shit up doesn't go well for you."

No shit. It seemed like Damian didn't understand the issue with the alternative, though. The second Iyo realized how deep things actually ran for Rhea, they'd be staring off a ledge of no return. That song and dance was old hat to her - one second it seemed like the world was her oyster, the next, she'd have lost a lover, partner, and friend in one fell swoop, without anything to show for her failings.

Infuriatingly, Damian seemed to read her mind, yet didn't care in the least. "Hear me out. If fucking her was all you wanted, well you got it. But you're doing *everything* the same," he stressed, poking right at the sorest spot he could. "It's going to bite you again."

A car behind her blared its horn in impatience. With a jolt, Rhea realized the line had edged forward a few lengths - far enough that the tinny drivethrough speaker was open at last.

"Shit, one sec," she mumbled to Priest, pulling forward to rattle off an order. "Uh, one of those ube drinks… matcha. You can do that right? Grande. And a grande earl grey latte. Two pumps of vanilla. Both iced."

From the console, Priest barked out a laugh. "Since when do you drink-"

“Is that everything for tod-”

“Shut up,” Rhea hissed, the speaker cutting off with a pop of static. A wave of embarrassment washed over her at the ordeal. Beside her, the phone in her cupholder buzzed, undoubtedly with a text from Iyo. “Sorry, not you. Yes, thanks.”

She didn't stop to listen for the total, eking onward as far as she could manage to escape the awkwardness of sitting there with the drive through attendant’s sonic presence.

Once firmly isolated in a hectic lineup once more, Rhea drew a breath and declared firmly, “Iyo isn't Liv.”

“Damn right she’s not,” Damian agreed. “She’s a human under the crazy,” he paused to no doubt pull a face that Rhea could imagine even across countless miles. “Still. She might be chill now, but you gonna gamble on her flipping shit when you break her heart?”

“Whaddya mean by *when?* Don't jinx me already, ya cunt.” She rolled her eyes, but didn’t hang up on him, no matter how badly she wanted to.

Unfortunately for her, he wasn’t wrong. Iyo was different from Liv in some respects, but that didn’t make screwing with her a safe option. Not that she was trying to tempt fate like that - after all, Iyo would have to return her feelings first for an exact repeat situation to happen.

That seemed an impossibility. For all of Iyo’s caring traits and kindnesses, there remained a wall between them that Iyo folded to again and again. If Iyo had feelings for her, wouldn't the stubbornness that Rhea loved about her have come into play already? The Iyo she knew wouldn't leave them teetering on the precipice of something, just to willingly fold, slipping out of a bed that used to be *theirs* without fighting to stay.

Her Iyo wasn’t a scared woman.

"Why don’t you stop this, then? I know this sounds stupid coming from me of all people, but she deserves better than someone who's not serious about her. Focus on what you actually want, and get the gold you keep talking about."

He knew what he was doing in saying that. It was clear bait, and despite seeing the bear trap a mile away, Rhea couldn't hold herself

back from the truth. "I don't care about the fucking belts, dude." Her teeth ground together, eyes closing as the reality set in.

Every time they talked like this, championships sat there as an excuse - a barricade between herself and a dream that seemed so much more impossible. The glint of metal was a distraction - she'd hoped that eventually, if she kept saying she wanted it, that would override the truth of her desires. From the get go, she hadn't thought of glory at all. She had thought about her friend, stuck in a meeting room, getting her spirit crushed for daring to care about Rhea. For the split second she had put her hand on that door to storm in, it had been about repaying a favour. But as soon as she saw Iyo slumped over that conference table, every moment after had been about making her happy again.

Somewhere along the way, she had discarded that singular desire with the foolish need to protect herself from that which hadn't happened.

Damian sucked his teeth. "Then it sounds like you know what you *do* care about."

Rhea hung up on him without a word.

Predictably enough, they ended up carpooling to the arena. Dakota slid into the back with her paper cup of hotel coffee, and Iyo hopped up front to excitedly claim her fancy Starbucks order. She made a soft noise of delight upon seeing the cloud of violet foam sat atop the earthy green below. The clash suited her so very well, Rhea thought, watching as the woman swirled her straw through the colours, the middle muddying to form a less enchanting grey-brown.

From the driver's seat, the younger woman drummed her nails across the top of the second drink, waiting and watching as Iyo took an eager sip of her own, face warping instantly into displeasure. A whine followed, eyebrows furrowed with the realization that two of her favourite things combined didn't have quite the effect she wanted.

Rhea lifted up the second drink in consolation, the smell of bergamot and vanilla wafting between them. "Swap you?"

Iyo reached for it instantly. She took a quick swig to clear the taste

from her mouth, relishing in the surprising familiarity of her favourite drink, body drooping with relief against the leather seats. "You started drinking tea?" She questioned, eyes sparkling pleasantly at the development.

The Australian shrugged, popping the straw of Iyo's rejected beverage into her mouth. Earthy and sweet, the flavour muddied into a swampwater concoction that left her tongue feeling out of sorts. While not the most pleasant experience Rhea had ever had, she could deal. A happy Iyo was worth some discomfort.

Dakota snorted from behind them, "Oh yeah, huge tea guy when you're not around. For sure." She kicked at the driver's seat to punctuate her sarcasm. "It reminds her of you."

A quick glare to the rearview mirror only served to spur Dakota on further, and an emboldened Dakota Kai was a dangerous one. Rhea definitely could have made buying Iyo a backup drink less conspicuous, and in turn saved herself from Dakota's ribbing, but if the worst thing the Kiwi had planned was to let Iyo in on the fact that her partner was well and truly whipped, so be it.

"Kick me again and there's a locker with your name on it, Kai." The younger woman threatened mildly.

Iyo giggled between sips of her latte. Her hand drifted over to Rhea's, laying over hers on the gear shift. "You two," the Japanese woman chided softly, shaking her head at the bickering pair. "Behave." The word was spoken with soft authority, the tone causing Rhea's mind to wander a little to the previous night, and what the possibilities were of hearing that voice in a different context altogether. Perhaps, if Rhea asked…

"Ceasefire, if you two stop flirting." Dakota agreed, interrupting Rhea's train of thought before it could go anywhere dangerous.

"Hm," Iyo turned to face the Kiwi in the backseat, a smile curving along her lips. "Does kissing count as flirting?" She mused, looking back towards Rhea.

"If it does, I'm keeping up the war," the Australian replied with a grin. She pulled out onto the city's main drag with a calm hand, traffic breaking around them. Inside, her heart had kicked itself up a notch from the mere thought. "I'm not giving that up."

She risked a glance Iyo's way. The smaller woman had a cute blush

spread across her cheeks, dimples growing deeper the longer that Rhea stared at her. Sometimes Rhea wasn't sure if the woman's beauty was compounding day by day, or if her rose-coloured glasses were tinting ever darker. In either case, she was well and truly enchanted. What she wouldn't give to pull over again right then and show Iyo how much she made Rhea feel - confessing with her touch what she couldn't speak to life.

"No eye sex! You can kiss, just - stop that, right now!" Dakota cried out in agony, covering her face dramatically as though that were the peak of salaciousness.

This was what life was like with Iyo as only a friend. The uncertain limbo they played had once felt like a comfort, but day by day, it began to feel like a cage instead. Though torn in two different directions, the truth of Rhea's feelings flipped through her gut, begging to surge up and drip from her tongue.

Iyo Sky had to be hers.

There were a hundred possible outcomes that had flitted through Rhea's mind over the past two days, but none of them came close to the reality.

Shayna and Iyo, locked into a final grapple, reversal after reversal culminating in Shayna being broken over Iyo's knee, one final moonsault sealing the three-count. Every muscle in Rhea's body tensed, ready for danger. Run-ins could've happened from any angle, or Shayna might've unloaded onto Iyo in frustration herself, intending to weaken or otherwise vent her anger upon the last remnants of Damage CTRL.

Instead, she had extended her hand to Iyo Sky, the two women exchanging a few curt words and a firm shake. The older woman slipped away from the ring, leaving her rival to stare at her own hand in disbelief, and then up the ramp, where Baszler had vanished from view. Applause from the crowd, and nothing else.

Rhea met her on the way back past the curtain, folding her larger body around her partner's sweat-slick, exhausted form. Iyo let out a grunt, allowing herself to lean into Rhea as they walked together,

holding her steady while the cameras captured their journey backstage. Without thinking much of it, Rhea pressed a kiss to the crown of Iyo's head. A contented hum escaped the Japanese woman at Rhea's affection, the semi-public spectacle of it all hitting the Australian a second too late. The cameraman gave a thumbs up as he wrapped up the shot, leaving them in search of new snippets worth capturing.

"I guess I should've asked if you're good with that," Rhea wondered aloud once they were alone. Their usual corner of chaos beckoned, Iyo leaping up onto an equipment case and Rhea leaning in beside her. One more match, and a short segment, and then it would be Rhea's turn to seal a spot in the Elimination Chamber alongside Iyo. The pressure mounted, despite her best efforts to not worry about it until the moment of.

"It was nice," Iyo countered softly, leaning her head on Rhea's shoulder. She gave the boney ridge on it a quick peck, looking up at Rhea fondly. "I like when you kiss me. Even if we're not-"

An immediate knot twisted the Australian's stomach as she imagined the final, unspoken word. *Girlfriends?* Is that where Iyo was going? Rhea opened her mouth, intending to prod at that mysterious space between them, only to choke on her tongue when the smaller woman finished the statement a beat late.

"-alone." Iyo spoke it with a growl, lifting her chin off of Rhea's shoulder to glare down the hall behind her. Liv was skipping towards them, her hands fanned out cheerfully before her.

As per usual, she interrupted with a too-loud voice and an overly sweet smile, approaching as though they were all long-lost friends. "Hey there, alphabet soup!" She came to a stop right before them, stepping in close to Iyo before Rhea had the chance to throw herself between the two of them. "Good match there, girlie. Knew you had it."

If looks could kill, Liv would've already been a dead woman, Iyo's scowl radiating nothing short of murder.

Whatever the blonde's aim was with disturbing the peace, Rhea knew better than to let her get rolling. The last time she had made that mistake, she had given enough openings for her former partner to work her talons into every old scar she could. "Get the fuck out of here, Liv," She growled, drawing her ex's immediate ire.

"Excuse me, I wasn't talking to you." Liv snapped, all pretense

vanishing. "Lurk like a weirdo if you must, but I have important business here." As though brushing aside a gnat, Liv patted at Rhea's chest dismissively. It only seemed to mildly annoy her when Rhea caught her wrist mid-motion, so she squeezed down until at last, the cocky smirk dropped into a wince of pain. The only expression that Rhea ever liked seeing on her. Iyo watched the interaction with consternation, lip curling.

"Not a single thing you have ever done is important. If you so much as look at her wrong..." The taller woman warned, looming over Liv in the most menacing stance she could muster.

Liv tugged her arm free roughly. She flicked her hair over one shoulder, turning back Iyo's way with a far more muted energy than a moment prior. The anger on the Japanese woman's face had been replaced with quiet disgust. "Possessive, I see. Guess she's fucking you, hey?"

Iyo's brows twitched up minutely, a flash of pain lancing through her features so quick that Rhea prayed Liv hadn't caught onto it. Her blood ran cold at the sight.

Once again, Liv had read Rhea like a book. Her wits never lacked. As brief as their stint together had been, Liv still knew Rhea better than anyone, and her cruelty never ceased to surprise. Saying a single word to her was an exercise in self-flagellation, but this time Rhea had managed to rope Iyo into the mind games through simple foolishness.

They ought to have been hiding it better - now that Liv knew, everyone would. Whatever chance Rhea had of doing things slowly seemed to evaporate to nothingness.

Of course, Priest had been right, it was all coming back to bite her. How could she possibly set about trying to woo Iyo once the two of them were under the microscope? With how private Iyo was to begin with, she had to be angry with Rhea for continually exposing them to scrutiny. There was no doubt in Rhea's mind that Liv was about to go in for the kill.

"Yes," Iyo declared firmly, catching Rhea off-guard. "Are you jealous?" She spoke with an air of unaffectedness, but despite how confident she seemed, the upward curve of her mouth felt hollow. A taunt meant to obscure how close to the surface her fears laid, bravado spilling over in defense of both herself and Rhea.

For a fleeting second, it seemed Liv was equally surprised, a frown

flashing across her face before the facade settled back in. A new sharpness gilded her tongue, the brazen rebuttal doing nothing but infuriating the blonde. "Nah, got old quick. How many times has she kicked you out of bed by now?" Her head tilted back to Rhea as she spat the accusation.

Rhea's lips parted, mind running a blank. That was the worst possible thing Liv could have attacked with - the truth. Every word Liv said was dripping in venom, her knowledge of how to wound others unparalleled.

The Australian couldn't let Iyo think the way she thought of her and Liv was at all similar, even if the way she treated them once they got too close to her heart was. That had nothing to do with them, and everything to do with her, after all. Hiding all the fear, all the pain, and all it had done was reflect onto the one person she wanted to protect. She couldn't form any rebuttal at all except for a wheeling, desperate bid for forgiveness. "Iyo..."

The Japanese woman didn't answer her, shoulders drawn tight. Her attention didn't waver from Liv, jaw working hard with the effort to keep from losing her temper. God, would Rhea ever love to see her let loose. The second Iyo did, Rhea would be right behind her, but not a second sooner - no matter how much her fist itched to feel the sickening crunch of bone beneath her knuckles. This had become her fight to command.

"You're a bitch." Iyo seethed, jumping down from her perch to face off against Liv. At a draw on height, perhaps, but Iyo always had a way of feeling larger than life to Rhea - the tilt of her chin and wry twist of her lips emanating a dominance that never failed to send a shiver down Rhea's spine. It seemed to have the same impact on Liv, the woman taking a hasty step backward, out from between the two other women.

“You should be nicer to me." Liv scoffed, nose wrinkled with derision. Rhea was about to snap something equally nasty, until Iyo's hand rose to touch the small of her back in silent warning, the simple gesture stilling her.

Instead, Iyo spoke for them both, voice cold and exact. "Why? Talk. It’s what you’re good at."

From the cold, diamond-sharp glint in Liv’s eye, it became obvious why. Every bit of their encounter had gone to plan, knocking them

both onto the back foot only to follow up with the knockout blow. “I told you. I have important business - Pearce told me I could deliver the good news. Congrats, we’re getting in the ring together again,” she explained smugly, not taking her eye off of Iyo. Her smile warped back into cloying brightness, tone all too chipper. “With company, unfortunately. Number one contendership for the tag titles, next week.”

Rhea’s heart sank. Another shot at getting somewhere, and it came in tandem with the mess of preparing for everything else that loomed on the horizon. They barely had time to go over the Judgment Day’s recent failed shot at the tag titles, and now they were being used as a stepping stone to launch Liv right back towards a second belt.

The only comfort in it was that last time around, the Judgment Day hadn’t beaten them, exactly. If not for the PFC getting involved, things might’ve shaken out differently. While the road ahead seemed clearer where faction disputes were concerned, if Liv seemed that confident, there had to be another trick up her sleeve that hadn’t been accounted for yet.

“Sounds like a date,” Iyo answered tersely. Over the past couple of minutes, her patience had worn thin. Her weight shifted, like a spring waiting to uncoil. The touch on Rhea’s back remained, but her fingers curled in, blunt nails digging into her spine with enough ferocity to remind Rhea to stay back, and let the shorter woman take control.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Liv returned her attention to Rhea, cloudy blue gaze crinkling in amusement at the edges, though the words she spoke were still directed wholly at her partner. "Just remember what I said about those front-row seats, Iyo. Someone here can be a sore loser. Wouldn't want history to repeat itself."

Iyo’s hand snatched hold of Rhea’s trunks before she could lunge forward as instinct demanded, bristling at the implication she would ever turn on Iyo like that. Unlike her tumultuous relationship with Liv, she and Iyo had always fostered a cushioning layer of respect that hadn’t been there with a single one of her ex-partners. But reliability was one thing, the other - the love Rhea held for the older woman, as deep as the hate she felt for Liv - was the key difference.

Held back as she was, Rhea instead snarled, "Oh, I'll show you a repeat any time you want, you fucking cunt." Images of every brawl spiralling back to that first blow to Liv's back flashed behind her eyes, tempting her back into the mindset of the Eradicator. One week. One

brief, fleeting week, and she would have it again.

Liv winked at them, and was gone.

"Please go back to flirting. This is so painful," Dakota broke the quiet that hung over the car. She sat alone up front, carefully piloting them through the city's unfamiliar streets, back to where the day had begun so hopefully.

While Iyo had decided to sit in back with Rhea, they hadn't so much as touched each other or said a word since leaving the venue. In fact, the only words Rhea had said at all after limping backstage moments after taking a match-ending Bayley-to-Belly had been, "Sorry."

Even that one word had been difficult, the pain of losing pricking her throat like a sickness. They both knew as clear as day why she'd been so out of it, the rage of their encounter with Liv filling every logical crevice in Rhea's mind, leaving her uncoordinated and sloppy. Everything Iyo had walked her through had disappeared into a flood of emotions. Heart pounding, ears ringing, muscles twitching the whole way through her entrance until the match bell rang. Bayley had prepared for the familiar onslaught of Rhea's reckless aggression, and hadn't been disappointed.

Rhea wished she could say she put up a good fight, but she knew when they watched back the tape, she'd look like a bull in a china shop. She was such a fucking disappointment.

The young woman sniffed, squeezing at the bridge of her nose to fend off tears of frustration. She stared resolutely at the scenery whipping past outside the window, anything to keep from breaking down with Dakota there.

Beside her, Iyo pawed at her hand, resting atop Rhea's bouncing knee. The first touch since Liv had worked her diabolical magic - again, holding Rhea back from something, emotions full to bursting.

"It will be okay," Iyo murmured. She played with the length of Rhea's fingertips, tracing along the bones of each digit slowly with her thumb. "When we win next week, we will have a shot at Wrestlemania together."

All that served to do was set Rhea quietly over the edge. She pulled her hand free, rubbing hard at her eyes. There was no stopping it anymore, tears burning wet tracks down her cheeks. It wasn't about Mania, she told herself. It was that she had failed Iyo. She'd have one less ally, and one more enemy in the chamber, making her path that much more impossible. If they didn't win contendership, what then?

The smaller woman's face lit up with concern, twinkling through her big brown eyes.

"Uh, if you guys need a minute-" Dakota called from the driver's seat uncertainly, attention darting between the road and the rearview mirror in worry.

"I'm fine," Rhea croaked, curling away in embarrassment at the attention. Okay, so maybe she was upset about missing out on her opportunity to get her hands back on her title. Why that hadn't come to mind when Liv ambushed them earlier, Rhea couldn't say. Her priorities were all over the place, and it was ruining everything. She simply couldn't have it all. If she didn't lock it in now, she'd end up with nothing.

Silence fell once more, neither woman convinced in the slightest that Rhea was telling the truth.

"We *will* win." Iyo repeated confidently, catching Rhea by the chin, forcing her to quit gazing out into the world and focus on what actually mattered. Her. *Them.*

Rhea sniffed back another bout of tears. "I don't want you to stop focusing on the Chamber just because I lost my shot. I need you to kick Liv's ass twice in a row for me." There was a pleading note in her voice she wasn't proud of, especially when Dakota was well in earshot despite trying to pretend she wasn't listening intently.

"I will. For you." Iyo promised, thumbing gently beneath Rhea's eyes to wipe bits of her makeup away. Her voice dropped to a whisper, low enough to provide some illusion of privacy. "But what Liv said-"

A jolt of fear rocked Rhea's core. "Don't. All she cares about is taking away everything I have, and that includes you." She squeezed her eyes shut, trying desperately not to think of all the times Liv had won in that pursuit. It would never be enough. She might only have one singular opportunity left at getting her hands on a title, but even if she and Iyo failed, it would be as a unit. "No matter what happens next week... I'm not letting you go."

Soft fingertips slid from the curve of Rhea's cheekbone down the slope of her jawline, tilting her chin down to meet Iyo's searching lips. A breathy sigh escaped Iyo, blooming against Rhea's mouth in invitation. Distantly, Rhea registered the soft squeak of surprise from the driver's seat, but she paid no mind - too enraptured by Iyo's kiss to worry about anyone else being able to tell how strongly she felt.

It was only a matter of time before the truth came out, anyway. Liv knew. Rhea would have to fess up soon, one way or another.

Iyo squirmed in Rhea's grasp. It took a concerted effort to not immediately let the smaller woman go - instead squeezing down harder around her biceps, dragging her up onto Rhea's upper back in her best approximation of a KOD. Iyo fought hard against it for a moment, twisting this way and that to try to find her freedom. Then, with a start, Rhea felt a sharp pain lance through her fingertips.

She jerked away, releasing her grip on her partner entirely. The Genius of the Sky landed elegantly on her feet, grinning.

"Did you bite me?!" The younger woman balked, staring at the indents across her knuckles where Iyo's teeth had just been.

Iyo rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, seemingly satisfied with her strategy. "Elimination Chamber is no-disqualification." She reminded her, smiling that beautiful, cruel, Cheshire-cat smile that drove Rhea so crazy.

"Fair enough," the Australian replied, assessing just how deep Iyo had gotten. It wouldn't be the first or the last time Iyo bit her, but some contexts were certainly more fun than others. A part of her was glad she wouldn't have to face off against Iyo in the Chamber once the field had cleared. "Just remember Bianca will whip you if you start playing dirty early."

A shadow passed behind the Japanese woman's face, reminding Rhea how much was on the line. Her confidence was back in place almost instantly, the veneer of an unruffled competitor replacing that vulnerable look. "I know. I have beat her before. Her and Roxy are not an issue." She shrugged with practised ease. It was believable enough to anyone who didn't know her very well.

"Bullcrap." Rhea retorted. She strolled to the side of the practice ring, leaning down out of the ropes to grab a couple bottles of water. She tossed Iyo one, slumping down on the mat for a breather. Iyo followed suit, legs dangling off the apron. "What's eating you?"

Her partner huffed in response, staring down at her feet. "Nuh-uh. You first. You've been sad all week and haven't talked about it. I like being the big spoon, but-"

Rhea laid herself down fully, head propped up on her hand enough to keep staring at Iyo's periphery. Once they had gotten home, things had calmed down, but it remained hard to shake the memories of Liv's words, and the week's losses. So maybe she had over-corrected a bit by avoiding talking about it, keeping the atmosphere light by day, and knocking at Iyo's door every night to sink back into what had become her happy place. There had been a couple times Iyo had tried to initiate something, but Rhea had gently rebuffed every attempt at deep conversation and sex alike.

Eventually she would have to contend with the accusation head-on. If she still struggled with the feelings behind it, she may as well start with what was easier - talking about it. "I keep trying to throw my life into neat little boxes, Iyo," she confessed softly, knowing Iyo's ears would be keenly honed to her voice, even at a murmur. Talking any louder felt wrong, like the rest of the world might hear and cast judgment. Iyo wouldn't though, she knew that much. "You see how it is at work, even. There's in the ring, and there's behind the curtain, and every time the two mix I end up fucking it up."

That week had been proof enough of that.

Iyo tilted her head toward Rhea, locking eyes with her. She looked tired, Rhea realized. How many nights had run late between them the past weeks - curled together, passing comfort back and forth like there was a precious finite quantity of it? Did it eat at Iyo, too?

"I don't have lines with you. That's never happened with anyone, and I don't know how to manage. Liv trampled over everything, because she didn't care what that did to me. And Dom... I made new boxes for him. That was all work, and the mask never left for a second of it." She sighed deeply. That hadn't helped in the end - he had played her right back, using her for his own gain until she had nothing left to give.

Iyo nodded like she understood. Maybe she did. "It's been a long time since I have had to fight alone," she confessed in turn.

Of course that was what was bothering her. After the past years of fighting in constant unison, she was for the first time facing down a match sans both faction and partner. Rhea swallowed hard at the memory of what the first time fighting without the Judgment Day behind her was like, without Priest close at hand. She'd been scared.

"We moved very fast, Rhea. I think it is okay if we're a bit mixed up." Iyo summed up. She swung her legs up, scooting her way over to Rhea's spot to lay beside her.

"I'm not so sure I want to slow down, chipmunk," Rhea murmured, brushing strands of dark hair away from her lover's face. "It feels okay to not have to keep things separated anymore."

The smaller woman hummed a response, nuzzling into the crook of Rhea's arm. She tilted her face up towards Rhea, a hand sliding into place on her sternum, just above her heart. "Do you want to try keeping things... not separated tonight? Maybe dinner?"

Rhea had never been asked on a date before. Not properly, anyway. People tended to assume that sort of request was cheesy, or childish - the sort of thing that someone like her would cringe away at. Nothing could have been further from the truth, her heart melting at the simple offer of something real. It seemed a fair enough compromise. If slowing down and starting over wasn't an appealing choice, filling in the blanks they had skipped over was reasonable.

"Yeah." Rhea agreed, closing her arms tightly around Iyo. "Let's give it a shot."

The last time they had been out in public together looking this coupley, Rhea hadn't been able to stop worrying about it the entire time. Now, however, she barely spared a thought to anyone else's opinion of them but her own. And they did paint a pretty picture, making their way arm-in-arm through crowded evening sidewalks.

Iyo had opted for something a touch casual, leather jacket draped over a glittery open-shouldered top that caught the streetlights. A pair of fishnets covered her legs, disappearing under the edge of a pair of shorts that gave Rhea plenty to look at. While her platform boots weren't enough to overcome their height difference, they came close

to eye-level, Rhea wearing nothing more than converse. A chunky necklace drew even more attention to the smooth slope of her shoulders, draped along her clavicle enticingly.

She was showing Rhea up for sure, but the Australian didn't mind in the least. Neither did Iyo, by the way she clung to Rhea's exposed arm, cutoff shirt leaving ample opportunity for contact.

They ended up settling on a corner taquería they'd both been to separately in the past, sharing a flight of margaritas that went right through Iyo. Frozen mango was Rhea's winner, followed by guava. Iyo had commandeered strawberry all for herself, and by the time lime came around, Rhea had to finish it off herself, the smaller woman already glowing red and giggling through a story about her luchadora days.

Rhea laughed her way through the story too, utterly charmed by the visual of a young Iyo growing more and more upset by each half-hearted flirtation she received as her trip went on - her insistence on wanting a serious romantic display spilling into comedic anger. Once their flan arrived, Rhea insisted upon feeding Iyo. If it was romance she wanted, it was romance she would get - even if they were fifteen years on from the incident.

"We should do this again," Rhea offered while holding the door open for a wobbly Iyo to step out onto the sidewalk ahead of her.

Her date shook her head vehemently. "Never again. Too much sugar, my stomach feels... ugh..." She wrapped her arms tightly around herself as Rhea stepped out to join her, hooking an arm around her waist for extra support.

"Not the drinks. The date," she clarified, guiding Iyo across the crosswalk, turning down a series of blocks she knew wouldn't take long to get an Uber from. "I like this." What she liked most was seeing Iyo enjoying herself. Wrestling took up so much time and energy, and while there were fun moments sprinkled throughout, seeing the whole of it melt away into the background while they relaxed was a wonderful experience.

"You do?" Iyo said in wonder, pausing to steady herself against Rhea. When Rhea turned to face her, the older woman was beaming at her. "The date is not done, you know." Her voice pitched low, pulling away from Rhea and sliding into her jacket pockets coyly.

A thrill rolled down Rhea's spine, just enough liquor muddling her

head to let the heat building within her belly fan to flame. "Anything in particular you have in mind, pretty girl?"

"Mm, maybe," the smaller woman mused, rocking back and forth on her platforms in anticipation. "Can I have anything?"

God, could she. "Of course." It came out husky and deep, matching the look simmering behind Iyo's usually sweet expression. A faint buzz stirred at the base of Rhea's skull, excitement growing as Iyo pulled out her phone to summon a ride home. One last hurdle to get through, but the look in Iyo's eye was appetizer enough.

"You sure?" She prodded again, far more gently, as if what she wanted was some absurd, off the wall proposition.

Rhea chewed at her lip in consideration. This was what she had wanted in agreeing to a date - swiping away the arbitrary rules she had made for herself, rewriting old haunts with new dreams. Iyo deserved to feel like she was Rhea's equal in this, too. Denying her had never been because of a lack of want on Rhea's part, only a lack of familiarity with letting go. It was clear what Iyo was getting at, and Rhea would be a liar to say she had never thought about it herself. In some ways, all her fantasies led to Iyo atop her, softly peeling apart every last scrap of armour that Rhea had forged for herself.

So she leaned down, their now-slight difference in height making speaking low in Iyo's ear trivial. "I want you to fuck me, Iyo."

A shiver ran through the smaller woman, accompanied by a delighted exhale that matched the elation surging within Rhea. Before Rhea could tempt her with anything else, Iyo grabbed her by the shirtfront and sealed their mouths together - demanding, possessive, hot and wet and claiming. Even drunk, she kissed with a single-minded purpose, body arching to press tight against Rhea's until a car horn beeped at the curb, signalling the presence of their driver.

With anyone else, Rhea would've been mortified.

With Iyo, she only thought about how many minutes it would take until they were home.

Chapter End Notes

one more sex scene to add to the queenslayer extras pile. yippee!

next chapter should also be relatively soon, i divorced them from

each other on account of (spoilers)

as always, bsky, but now also, tumblr! the tumblr might have bonus content from time to time thrown up there that doesn't make it to ao3... some short, some perma-unfinished, some a special kind of funky :)